

THE
FRONTIERS SAGA
EPISODE 13

A
SHOW
OF
FORCE

Ryk Brown

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FORCE**

Ryk Brown

The Frontiers Saga Episode #13: A Show of Force
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CHAPTER ONE

The Jung battle platform held its position a few hundred kilometers above the surface of Copora, just as it had for the last three years. Its presence above the inhabited, Earth-like moon orbiting the third gas giant in the 61 Cygni system served as a constant reminder to those on the surface below that they were, and always would be, subjects of the Jung Empire. Unlike the smaller frigates and cruisers, both the battle platform, and the considerably smaller battleship, were forced to maintain their position on the opposite side of the moon from its parent world, Kleiades. The battle platform, being more than twenty kilometers in diameter, found itself expending far too much propellant as it fought the gravitational influences of the gas giant. Although impossible to see with the naked eye from the surface, on a clear night the citizens of Copora could easily spot the platform, glowing a brilliant turquoise as it reflected the light bouncing off of Kleiades.

As usual, shuttles of varying sizes, as well as small groups of fighters coming and going, could be seen entering and exiting the numerous flight bays located in three of the platform's six arms. In addition, on this day, one of the four frigates assigned to the 61 Cygni battle group could be seen entering the massive docking bay on the outermost tip of the platform's number three arm, to complete its scheduled resupply. With the exception of the frigate, the scene appeared to be like any other day over Copora.

Then something changed.

An irregular breach, at least three hundred meters in diameter, suddenly appeared in the battle platform's central structure just above its number three arm. Massive amounts of debris shot out the opposite side of the platform's central structure below its number six arm. Multiple secondary explosions followed immediately after, causing both the number six and number five arms to break away from the platform. An instant later, a second breach appeared, this time in the topside of the number four arm, the debris shooting out the bottom side of the arm as it too broke away from the platform's central structure. Numerous explosions from within the still-intact portions of the platform continued to occur, spreading outward, as the entire platform came apart. More explosions from within the now-detached arms engulfed what little remained, as the symbol of Jung supremacy in the 61 Cygni system ceased to exist.

People moving about the streets of Gastien, Copora's capital city, looked upward in astonishment at the display in the evening skies above. Where the ever present turquoise glow of the Ton-Kwieset had once been, there were now only orange-yellow explosions, appearing and then disappearing in rapid succession. Several small, brilliant, white flashes marked the platform's final demise, as several of her automatically ejected antimatter cores' containment systems failed. The Coporans could scarcely believe their eyes as the explosions in the sky faded, leaving only the occasional flash of latent secondary explosions amongst the many larger pieces of scattering debris.

The gathering crowds erupted in cheers at the realization of what had just occurred, despite the knowledge that they could be shot on site by any Jung soldier who might witness

their joyous outbursts. The excitement of the moment was as overwhelming as it was unbelievable.

Again, in the skies above, more than eighty degrees to the west of the original explosions, more detonations appeared. The crowd again exploded with delight as they watched the Jar-Paddic meet its demise as well. "The Jung have fallen!" someone cried.

"Jump complete," Loki announced from the backseat of Falcon One's cockpit as the blue-white jump flash subsided.

The interceptor shuddered violently as it found itself abruptly forced into atmospheric flight after jumping in low over the streets of Gastien from their previous position well outside the 61 Cygni system.

"Damn!" Josh cried out as he slammed the throttles for the Falcon's lift thrusters to their maximum setting. "Is the atmosphere thick here, or what?"

"Adjust heading, one point five degrees to port," Loki instructed. "Reduce speed to three five zero."

"One and a half to port, three five zero." Josh made the necessary adjustments as his partner prepared to launch weapons. He glanced upward briefly, taking in the explosions far above them. "Holy shit! Look at that!"

"I saw them," Loki replied.

"What about the others?" Josh asked, returning to business.

"Three jump flashes," Loki responded. "One to port, and two to starboard. All trailing. Maintain course and speed. Locking on primary and secondary targets. Ten seconds to weapons release."

"I've got nothing on my threat board," Josh announced. "It looks like we caught them by surprise."

"Weapons away," Loki reported as he pressed the launch button on his weapons control screen. The red threat warning light began blinking at the top of his console. He glanced at his threat display as orange icons began popping up. "If we did, then their automatic defense systems are damned fast. I've got multiple air defense turrets powering up all over the city!"

"Falcons, Leader," their commander's voice crackled over the comms. *"Breaking left to engage live air-defense turrets. One, take down the three dead ahead. Two, take the two to the east. Three, loop over and kill the one behind us. Execute targets, then jump to rendezvous point alpha-1."*

"One copies," Loki responded back over the comms. "Veer right and take the far tower," Loki instructed. "I'll take the ones to the left with the nose turret as we pass."

"Turning right!" Josh replied. "Let's go blow some shit up!"

The crowds of onlookers who had been pouring out onto the streets of Gastien only moments earlier were beginning to realize that they were in the middle of a war. However, the battle wasn't only in the skies above, it was also on the streets below. Three fighters of unknown origin had suddenly appeared from blue-white flashes of light. Within seconds, they had streaked overhead and launched missiles at distant Jung targets. Then, after a brief attack on Jung air-defense towers with their guns, they disappeared as miraculously as they had arrived.

The crowd began to disperse as the onlookers feared for their safety, seeking refuge anywhere they could as more flashes of blue-white light appeared in groups of three all around the city skyline. More missiles were launched,

leaving thin contrails as they streaked between buildings. At the end of their journey, the missiles would arc upward briefly before turning back toward the surface, their warheads detonating just above their targets.

Alarm klaxons sounded in the distance, sirens wailed, and the thunderous, rapid-fire pounding of Jung air-defense rail guns that had not yet been destroyed could be heard in the distance. Flashes of blue-white light continued to appear in every direction as the fighters of unknown origin seemingly popped in and out of existence. They would linger only long enough to deliver their weapons onto their targets, disappearing again before the Jung air defenses could lock onto them.

Those brave enough to peer out from their hiding places watched as Jung vehicles filled with combat troops and technicians rolled past. The vehicles paused at intersections just long enough to drop off small squads of soldiers that dispersed quickly in preparation to maintain control over the population during the attack.

A brilliant, blue-white flash appeared in between the buildings, only a few meters above the street, accompanied by a deafening clap and a rush of displaced air. The flash immediately subsided, revealing a small, armed shuttle craft, its engines roaring at full power to maintain its altitude just above the surface. The shuttle's forward momentum continued to carry it forward, as its reverse thrusters fired to decelerate. Menacing looking troops clad in flat black combat armor stood in the open doorway of the shuttle as it came to a hover, still only three meters above the street.

At the intersection ahead, the Jung soldiers who had just been dropped off spun around toward the hovering enemy shuttle. After a moment of hesitation at the unfamiliar sight,

the soldiers opened fire on the shuttle. As the red bolts of energy from their rifles ricocheted off the armored underside of the shuttle, the enemy ship's side-mounted, double-barreled weapons quickly angled downward and opened fire. Red-orange balls of plasma energy spewed from the twin barrels in rapid succession, obliterating the helpless Jung soldiers at the intersection. The engagement lasted only seconds, after which the shuttle's guns went silent and the troops standing in its doorway leapt outward. The armored soldiers fell the few meters to the surface, hitting the ground running with their weapons raised and ready for action. By the time the six, black-clad soldiers had taken their first few running steps down the streets of Gastien, the shuttle had already pitched upward and begun a climb, disappearing seconds later in another blue-white flash of light.

The invading soldiers charged down the street directly into incoming Jung weapons fire directed toward them from the next intersection. The invaders zigzagged in practiced fashion, presenting difficult targets as they continued to charge forward with weapons firing.

The Jung soldiers fired multiple rounds in rapid succession, sweeping their weapons from side to side as they attempted to kill the on-rushing enemy. The invaders, on the other hand, fired single shots, each one finding its intended target with maximum effect.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported from the Aurora's navigation station.

"On direct heading to target charlie one," Mister Child announced from the helm.

"Locking all forward torpedoes and cannons on target charlie one," Jessica reported from the tactical console.

"Weapons free," Nathan ordered calmly from his command chair in the middle of the Aurora's bridge.

"Massive debris fields!" Mister Navashee announced with excitement. "The platform and the battleship," he added. "Debris, gases, bodies, wreckage." Mister Navashee turned slightly to glance over his shoulder at the captain. "Both targets are completely destroyed," he declared, an obvious grin on his face.

"Firing forward weapons," Jessica announced.

"Full mag," Nathan ordered as the red-orange light of the plasma shots bathed the bridge in similar light. He watched as the image of open space on the semi-spherical view screen that encompassed the forward half of the Aurora's bridge shuddered for a moment, after which it revealed two Jung cruisers, both of them showing their profiles, one near and one far.

"Oh, this is too damn easy," Jessica exclaimed as the first round of three plasma torpedoes slammed into the unsuspecting cruiser.

"Multiple direct hits," Mister Navashee reported. "Secondaries... charlie one is coming apart."

"Pitching up," the helmsman reported. "Bearing onto target charlie two."

Nathan watched the main view screen as the first cruiser slid downward and out of view as it broke apart. "Jump flashes, Mister Navashee?"

"Scouts Two and Three have just jumped in, Captain. One should be jumping in any..." Mister Navashee's brow furrowed as he studied his sensor displays. "Charlie two is powering up her defenses. She'll have full shields in twelve seconds."

Nathan glanced at the image of the distant cruiser on the main view screen. Although he could see the ship clearly, he knew that it was still a considerable distance away and was visible only because of the view screen's current magnification setting. "Range to target?"

"Twelve hundred kilometers," Mister Navashee answered.

"Mister Riley?" Nathan urged.

"Micro-jump, aye, sir," the navigator responded.

"Zero mag," Nathan ordered as the light from their jump flash washed over the bridge.

"Jump complete."

"Locking all weapons on charlie two," Jessica announced.

"Target's shields are at eighty percent and climbing," Mister Navashee reported.

"Switch to triplets on all forward weapons," Nathan ordered.

"Firing triplets, Jessica replied. The bridge became illuminated with flashes of red-orange light as the first plasma charges left the Aurora's forward torpedo tubes."

"Jump complete," Commander Eckert reported as Scout Three's blue-white jump flash subsided.

"Jung frigate, dead ahead and down three," Ensign Agari announced. "Range to target; ten kilometers and closing fast."

"Pitching down," Captain Nash said as he manipulated the ship's attitude thrusters to bring their nose onto the approaching target.

"Port and starboard plasma cannons charged and ready," Lieutenant Scalotti confirmed. "Weapons lock in three..."

"Escape jump, plotted and ready," Commander Eckert stated.

"Two..."

"Stand by to jump," Captain Nash ordered calmly.

"One..... Weapons locked! Firing!"

Red-orange light flashed over Scout Three's flight deck in rapid succession as the ship fired its newly installed weapons in combat for the first time. Captain Nash fought back the urge to smile as the last red-orange ball of plasma left their cannons. "Escape jump," he ordered as the first shots slammed into the enemy frigate, still far beyond their visual range.

"Escape jump in three..." Commander Eckert began.

"Direct hits!" Ensign Agari reported with excitement.

"Two..."

"How bad, Toosh?" Captain Nash asked as the ship's jump field emitters began to spew forth blue-white light that quickly engulfed the entire vessel.

"One..."

"Four! Five! Six...!"

"Jumping," Lieutenant Commander Eckert reported as the jump flash washed over them. "Jump complete."

"Toosh?" the captain urged, still waiting for a definitive answer.

"Not sure yet, sir," Ensign Agari responded. "It will take a few seconds for me to get new readings since we jumped, but she's got to be breaking up. I thought I saw secondaries just before we jumped."

"Let's come back around for another pass, just in case," Captain Nash suggested as he initiated a one hundred and eighty degree turn. "Have our next attack jump ready," the captain added.

"Already loaded, Captain," Commander Eckert replied.

"There's no way that frigate survived six plasma shots," Lieutenant Scalotti insisted, "not with her shields down."

"I'm sure you're right, Donny," the captain stated.

"He sure is," Ensign Agari declared. "She broke into three pieces! Huge debris field! Almost no energy emissions." The ensign turned to look forward at his captain. "That target is definitely destroyed, sir."

Captain Nash turned to his right, looking back over his shoulder at his crew, a smile forming. "Looks like we got our first official kill, gentlemen." He looked at Commander Eckert on his right. "New jump, Skeeched. Let's see how Captain Poc is doing."

Four more blue-white flashes over the central square made the Coporan dusk appear as day for the briefest of moments. Shock waves of air displaced by the suddenly arriving ships rattled the nearby buildings, blowing out windows at ground level. Engine pods screamed as the four strange-looking, alien ships descended the last ten meters, riding down to the surface on fiery jets. Almost simultaneously, oversized landing gear deployed from the four ships, locking into position just as their wheels touched the ground.

In a matter of seconds, the massive cargo pods hanging beneath each of the strange ships were lowered to the surface. Just before contact with the scorched ground below, clamps released from the hard points atop the cargo pods, dropping them the last half meter. The massive pods struck the surface with ground-shaking thuds that rattled the area as the four shuttles, now unburdened by their cargo, went to full thrust once more and leapt upward with ease.

From either side of each rectangular cargo pod, large armored bulkheads slid out and three meter-wide ramps deployed both fore and aft. Dozens of black-clad soldiers flowed down the fore and aft ramps from either sides of the pods, just as the four ascending shuttles that had deposited them only moments earlier, disappeared in brilliant flashes of light that seemed to tear holes in the evening sky.

Laser turrets popped up from all four corners of each cargo pod, immediately returning incoming fire from Jung troops charging toward them from nearby intersections. The black-clad troops continued to charge forward, spreading out in all directions, jinking left and right to avoid incoming Jung fire as they continued forward, their weapons firing. Despite the hail of incoming bright-red energy weapons fire, very few of the invaders were struck down.

The Coporans staring down upon the battle from the upper floors of the surrounding buildings watched in amazement. The invaders were easily outnumbered ten to one, with even more Jung reinforcements undoubtedly being dispatched from their base not fifty kilometers distant. Yet already less than a minute into the confrontation, the amount of Jung energy weapons fire had decreased by half, and the black-clad invaders continued to confidently fan out in all four directions, dispatching the Jung defenders... One shot, one kill.

Commander Telles walked confidently down the ramp from one of the four cargo pods, stepping to one side and scanning the immediate perimeter as the last few troops from his pod charged toward the enemy fire.

"Watchdog reports six high-speed targets coming in from the north," Master Sergeant Jahal reported as he too came down the ramp. "Low and fast. ETA, three mikes. Shall we intercept?"

“Negative,” Commander Telles ordered. “Warn the men to seek cover just before the targets arrive, and direct all of our laser turrets at the fast movers as they pass. We need those Falcons to clear out all surface-based air defenses *before* we move on their base. The next wave of jump ships will not have the same advantage of surprise.”

“Understood,” the master sergeant nodded.

The commander continued to scan the area as the last of his men fanned out to secure the perimeter. The placement of the four pods had been perfect, with each of them at the corner of the great square near the center of Gastien. To his right was the Coporan capitol building. Once a proud symbol of the Coporan people, and more recently the seat of power of their Jung conquerors, the building was now ablaze, the result of a strike by the second wave of Falcons that had jumped away only moments before his arrival. He knew they had only minutes before Jung forces from all over the Earth-like moon would descend upon them. It was a bold strategy, attempting to establish a strongpoint in the middle of the Coporan capital, but it *was* possible... with jump drives.

Four more flashes appeared overhead as additional boxcars jumped into hovering positions only twenty meters above the center of the square. They did not descend. Instead, massive doors along the underside of their cargo pods swung open, allowing four Kalibri gunships to drop out of each pod. As they fell toward the surface, the three, oversized, ducted fans on each gunship came to life, providing much-needed lift. The nimble gunships abruptly halted their fall toward the surface and veered away on predetermined departure paths, as the boxcars that had delivered them began to climb away, disappearing in their own blue-white flashes only seconds later.

The sixteen Kalibri gunships raced away in pairs, flying over the streets of Gastien, darting between buildings as they opened fire on Jung troops below scrambling for cover.

Commander Telles almost smiled. He had just inserted four hundred Ghatazhak soldiers, four armored and heavily armed bunkers, and sixteen close air support gunships, right into the face of the Jung seat of power in the 61 Cygni system. In a few minutes, another strike force of similar size would instantly surround the Jung military base outside of the city. Once these two Jung strongholds were destroyed, the remaining Jung forces scattered across Copora would be easily eliminated.

As the battle continued to rage around him, he glanced up at the fading balls of fire and debris from the Jung battleship and battle platform. Again, he almost smiled as he imagined the Aurora ambushing and destroying the Jung cruisers with relative ease. It felt good to be on the offensive.

"Next jump point in thirty seconds," Loki announced.

"I'll be on the numbers in ten," Josh replied, as he continued his turn. A distant flash of red-orange light to their left, in high orbit above the gas giant, caught his eye as he rolled out of his turn. "Damn, what the hell was that?"

"Checking..." Loki studied his sensor screen for a moment. "... Got it. Scout Two destroyed a frigate... And in a single pass."

"On the numbers, reducing speed."

"Jump point in ten," Loki updated.

Josh glanced forward at the moon Copora which now lay dead ahead and slightly below them. Despite the dozens of low altitude jumps into the atmosphere that he and Loki had

executed in the past, the rush he felt seconds before execution was always there.

“Jumping in three.....” Loki counted down.

Josh moved his left hand to the throttle for the lift thrusters.

“Two.....”

Josh pulled back slightly on his flight control stick, causing the Falcon’s nose to pitch up slightly while still maintaining their direction of flight.

“One.....”

“Arrival attitude set,” Josh reported as his visor became opaque.

“Jumping.”

Josh instinctively closed his eyes and slammed the throttle for the lift thrusters to maximum as the jump flash washed over them. A split second later, his visor cleared and he could see the streets of Gastien rushing up at them. The Falcon’s engines screamed as its lift thrusters fought to slow their descent. The ship shook violently due to both the displacement of air caused by their sudden arrival in the Coporan atmosphere, as well as the vibrations of their lift thrusters reverberating through their airframe.

“Jump complete,” Loki reported. “Locking on targets, opening weapons bay doors.”

As exciting as a jump into the atmosphere so close to the surface always seemed, both Josh and Loki knew that they were never really in any danger of impacting the ground. So shallow was their entry angle to the surface, that their lift thrusters were only needed for a few seconds, in order to allow the Falcon’s lifting body to take over the job of keeping the ship airborne.

“Weapons locked, missiles armed, firing,” Loki announced as he activated the weapons release sequence.

“All weapons away.”

Josh kept his eyes forward, watching as their four missiles streaked away ahead of them, continuing between the buildings for several hundred meters before they began to climb upwards at a shallow angle. “Pitching up,” he announced as he pulled the flight control stick back slightly to initiate a shallow climb of their own.

“Jumping in three...” Loki stated. Red threat indicator lights began to flash on his console as an alarm sounded in his helmet comms. “Incoming fire.”

“Evasive?” Josh asked, moving his left hand to the main throttle.

“Negative,” Loki ordered, “Jumping.”

Falcon One disappeared in a blue-white flash of light just as it cleared the tops of the buildings between which it had flown. The evening fog swirled wildly, filling the void left by the disappearing jump ship as red-orange energy bolts pierced the chaotic mist.

The four missiles reached the top of their arcs, turning downward toward their targets. The Jung air-defense cannons on the surface that were being targeted swung their barrels toward the incoming missiles and continued firing. However, the Alliance missiles had their own evasive programming. They each began to corkscrew wildly as they continued their descent toward their targets, the radius of their spiral varying randomly. Seconds later, the four missiles slammed into their targets, exploding in brilliant yellow flashes.

Jung air-defense cannons exploded, sending a devastating shock wave out in all directions that nearly leveled neighboring structures. More yellow flashes could be

seen in the distance and in all directions, as the air-defense cannons targeted by other Falcons also exploded.

"Jump complete," Commander Eckert reported as Scout Three's jump flash subsided.

"Man, I'm glad these aren't real windows," Captain Nash commented, "otherwise, we would all be blind by now." The Captain turned slightly to his right looking aft over his shoulder. "Where is Scout One, Toosh?"

"Sensors show Scout One ten kilometers ahead slightly to port. They're firing, sir."

"Eyes on," Captain Nash requested. The image on the view screens in front of them that normally displayed only their forward view, changed to a magnified view of Scout One's target, a Jung frigate. Six red-orange balls of plasma, fired by Scout One moments earlier, struck the enemy frigate as its rail guns were coming about to open fire. Yellow flashes of light reported their impacts against the frigate's hull, and secondary explosions from within further reported their penetration. The profile of Scout One could be seen passing over the image of the Jung frigate as the secondary explosions from within its hull tore it apart.

"I guess One didn't need us after all," Captain Nash commented. "Wellsy, patch me through."

"You're live, sir," the comm officer replied.

"What took you so long, Poc?" Captain Nash asked over the comms, a touch of sarcasm apparent in his tone.

"Jumped in a bit farther from the target than expected," Captain Poc replied. *"Must be a glitch in the jump-nav computer."*

"Or in your copilot," Captain Nash quipped back. "Meet you at the rally point." The captain looked to his right.

"Skeech?"

"Rally point it is, sir," Commander Eckert replied.
Captain Nash smiled. "I could get used to this."

"Confirmed. Target charlie two is destroyed," Mister Navashee reported from the Aurora's sensor station.

"What about the frigates?" Nathan wondered.

"Scouts Two and Three have already taken out their targets," Jessica replied from the tactical station. "Scout One's target is on the far side of Copora."

"Incoming message from Scout Two," Naralena announced from the comm station at the back of the bridge. "They are relaying from Scout One... Target foxtrot one is also destroyed. Scouts One and Three are jumping to the rally point, along with Scout Two."

"That means we now *own* the 61 Cygni system," Jessica declared.

"Not yet we don't," Nathan corrected, appearing slightly annoyed at her statement as he slowly rotated his command chair to face aft. "Not until our forces on the surface have taken control of Gastien, *and* that Jung base has been either captured *or* destroyed." He looked at Jessica. "Any word?"

"Flight ops reports all operations over Gastien are on schedule," Jessica answered. "No air losses reported."

"Any losses on the ground?" Nathan wondered.

"None reported," Jessica replied. "Then again, Telles wouldn't waste time reporting losses unless he felt it was significant."

"Yeah, I know," Nathan said. "Problem is, Commander Telles's idea of *significant* isn't necessarily the same as ours."

"I'm detecting all three Scouts are now at the rally point, Captain," Mister Navashee reported.

"Mister Giles, move us into high orbit around Copora and hold position over Gastien," Nathan ordered. "Comms, notify all Scouts to move into position around Copora to prevent escape. If any Jung shuttles attempt to flee Copora, take them out."

"Yes, sir," Naralena acknowledged.

"Contact Telles while you're at it," he added.

"Message, sir?" Naralena inquired.

Nathan looked at Jessica and smiled. "Tell him we now *own* the 61 Cygni system."

Commander Telles stood in the middle of the command post, his eyes scanning the various view screens in precise and practiced fashion. The screens displayed the feeds from cameras installed in the helmets of each Ghatazhak soldier. The images changed from time to time as technicians, monitoring the hundreds of camera feeds, selected those they felt at any given moment needed to be seen by their commander.

No ordinary person could keep track of which combatant's point of view they were seeing at any one moment, nor where that combatant was located in relation to the overall battle. However, for Commander Telles, it was a simple task of matching IDs in the upper corner of each display to their corresponding icons on the current tactical map.

"It looks like we've pretty much got this area under control," Master Sergeant Jahal stated.

"Indeed," Commander Telles agreed. "Have we uplinked to the Aurora?"

"A few minutes ago," the master sergeant replied. "They should be broadcasting globally as soon as the Scout ships get into position."

"Transfer tactical control for this area to Bunker Two." Telles looked at the lead monitoring technician. "Show me the feeds from Strike Group Two," he ordered, "squad leaders only."

The images on the view screen changed. Although it was obvious that the combatants were in an entirely different location, as evidenced by the lack of tall buildings in the background, the images they displayed were similar. Jung weapons fire was flying about, seemingly in all directions. The Jung resistance at their base outside of Gastien was considerable.

Commander Telles noticed a look of concern on the senior monitoring technician's face. "Problem?"

"We're only receiving two hundred feeds," the senior controller reported.

Commander Telles tapped his comm set. "Two Leader, Command. Sit-rep."

"Command, Two Leader," the commanding officer of Strike Group Two replied over comms. The sound of weapons fire, explosions, and screams of agony could be heard in the background. *"Resistance is heavy, sir. The Jung have armored gun emplacements along the wall, positioned every ten meters, with multiple turrets at each corner. In addition, the perimeter is seeded with antipersonnel mines. Estimate force strength to be greater than five thousand within."*

"Containment?"

"Confirmed. We may not be able to get in, but they sure as hell can't get out, either."

"Losses?" the commander asked dispassionately.

"Estimate two hundred and twelve still combat effective."

"That's nearly half their force," Master Sergeant Jahal said under his breath.

"What about the insertion teams?" the commander inquired, ignoring the master sergeant. "Did any of them make it in?"

"Affirmative, but they didn't last long. There are too many Jung troops inside the walls. We can keep jumping teams in and try to thin the bastards out, but we're going to lose a few hundred of our own doing it, not to mention a few combat jumpers. So far, we've been lucky."

Commander Telles took a moment studying the tactical map.

"Incoming message from the Aurora, Commander," the comm officer reported. "Message reads, 'We now own the 61 Cygni system.'"

"Own?" the master sergeant looked at his commander. "Nash?"

"Undoubtedly," the Commander agreed. "Such a bold statement would be out of character for Captain Scott." Telles returned his attention to the views of the battle. "Two Leader, Command... Dragon five."

"Scott isn't gonna like it," the master sergeant mumbled.

Commander Telles ignored his master sergeant's warnings. He knew that there was a high probability for loss of Coporan life under the alternate plan. Most military bases utilized civilian workers to perform mundane housekeeping tasks, and they had no intelligence as to whether or not the same was true on Copora. It was for that reason that they had decided to at least attempt to insert a number of Ghatazhak precision strike teams within the Jung base, in the hope that the element of surprise would provide the

edge they needed. What they had not known, however, was the actual number of Jung soldiers stationed within the base. One thing he was quite certain of; the current strategy would result in even greater Ghatazhak losses, all without any guarantee of success. In his mind, such losses were unacceptable, not because the loss of his men bothered him, but because future reinforcement levels were unknown.

"Command, Two Leader. Copy Dragon five."

Commander Telles looked at his comm officer. "Get me the Aurora."

"Jump complete," Commander Eckert reported as Scout Three's jump flash faded away. "At intercept position tango seven."

"Weapons?" Captain Nash inquired.

"Laser turrets charged and ready," Lieutenant Scalotti replied. "Plasma cannons are also on line."

"Rolling over," the captain said as he put the ship into a roll to starboard. The image of the moon Copora below began to move along the outer edges of their window-like forward view screens, from left to right. "Let's hope nothing bigger than a shuttle tries to make a run for it," he added as Copora came to rest across the top of the screens at the end of their roll maneuver.

"Captain, the Aurora is moving. She's changing position," Ensign Agari reported.

"Message from Aurora, Captain," Wellsy announced from the comm station. "Dragon five... minus two twenty."

"This ought to be interesting," Captain Nash commented.

"Contacts!" Ensign Agari reported. "Three ships, coming up fast from the surface. Shuttles... two personnel, one

cargo.”

“FTLs?” Captain Nash asked.

“Unknown. They’ve got the power plants for it, though.”

“ETA to FTL threshold?”

“Lead ship will reach threshold in a minute twenty,”
Ensign Agari answered.

“Any armaments detected?”

“No, sir.”

“Comms, broadcast on all frequencies... Tell them to return to the surface or they will be destroyed,” Captain Nash ordered.

Ensign Wells activated their comms and immediately began his broadcast. “Attention departing shuttles! Return to the surface immediately or you will be fired upon!”

“I said, destroyed, Wellsy,” Captain Nash insisted, slight irritation in his tone.

“Sorry, sir,” the ensign replied. “Return to the surface or you will be destroyed.”

“One minute until the lead ship reaches FTL threshold.”

“Target the lead ship’s engines,” Captain Nash ordered.

“Aye, sir,” Lieutenant Scalotti acknowledged.

“Any chance they didn’t hear the warning?” the captain wondered.

“If they have their comms on, they heard it, sir,” Wellsy insisted.

“Fifty seconds to threshold,” Ensign Agari reported.

“Lasers locked on the lead ship’s drive section,”
Lieutenant Scalotti reported.

“Lead ship’s power levels are increasing rapidly,” Ensign Agari warned. “Suspect they’re going to FTL, sir.”

“Take their engines out, Donny,” Captain Nash ordered.

“Firing lasers,” Lieutenant Scalotti replied.

A split second later, a small burst of yellow-orange light was seen in the distance, along Copora's horizon. A moment later, a bigger flash of light.

"Target destroyed," Ensign Agari reported.

Captain Nash turned partly to his left, calling back over his shoulder. "I told you to target their main drive..."

"...I did, sir."

"At those power levels, our lasers must have overloaded their reactors, Captain," Ensign Agari said in defense of the lieutenant.

"We did warn them that they would be destroyed..." Wellsy chimed in.

"...I was hoping to avoid that," the captain interrupted. "Hell, we don't even know if the occupants were Jung..."

"Who else would they be?" Commander Eckert insisted. "They were trying to escape, after all... And they didn't heed our warnings..."

"For all we know their comms are out. Hell, they don't even know who is invading them."

"Come on, Captain..."

"Second shuttle will reach FTL threshold in twenty seconds, Captain," Ensign Agari warned.

"Lasers are locked on the second shuttle," Lieutenant Scalotti added.

"Second shuttle's power signature is rising," Ensign Agari reported.

"Take them out," Captain Nash ordered, shaking his head.

"They've got to be Jung," Commander Eckert insisted.

"Firing lasers," Lieutenant Scalotti announced.

"If they're not, they would have turned around after seeing the first shuttle destroyed," the commander continued.

"Second target is destroyed," Ensign Agari reported.

Captain Nash sighed. "I don't suppose the third shuttle is turning around?"

"No, sir," Ensign Agari replied.

"Locked onto third shuttle," Lieutenant Scalotti added.

"They're powering up as well," Ensign Agari announced.

"Take them out as well," Captain Nash ordered, resigning himself to the inevitable.

"This is war, Captain," Commander Eckert reminded his captain, keeping his voice low so that the rest of the crew could not hear him. "People die."

"Doesn't mean I have to like it," Captain Nash replied.

"Falcon One, Three, Five, and Seven," the flight controller's voice crackled over the comms. "Redirect... Redirect. Grid four five seven. Fifteen point four by eight point five. Ground forces moving to ambush Strike Two at target bravo."

Loki punched in the new target coordinates as the message continued.

"Eight armored with WEPS. Ten armored personnel carriers, without. Falcons One and Three engage. Falcons Five and Seven fly cover. Jung fast movers inbound from the north. ETA, three mikes. Warning... Dragon two."

"You got it?" Loki asked.

"Got it," Josh answered as he initiated a high-speed turn. "How far?"

"Minute five at max speed," Loki replied.

"Can we jump there?"

"At this altitude?" Loki declared, his eyes wide. "We're skimming the treetops, Josh."

"Can we?"

"Fuck," Loki cursed as he punched the coordinates into the jump-nav computer. "Hold your course and speed," he instructed. "Three, Five, Seven... One. Jumping in five. Flight. Falcon One. ETA to target, four seconds."

"Hell yes!" Josh exclaimed.

"Three....."

Josh wiggled in his seat, leaning forward slightly as if preparing for the jump and the following attack run.

"Two....."

"*Oh, my God,*" one of the other Falcon pilots exclaimed over the comms.

"Heroes or zeros, baby!" Josh declared in excitement.

"Please don't let it be zeros," Loki mumbled as his visor became opaque. "Jumping."

The jump flash washed over Falcon One as it streaked along the treetops. It disappeared a split second later, taking the tops of several trees with it.

A long line of armored Jung vehicles raced down the main road that led from Gastien to the Jung military base in the countryside just outside of the Coporan capital. Not more than a kilometer behind them, a blue-white flash of light appeared in the evening sky.

Falcon One suddenly appeared as the blue-white flash subsided, along with the tops of several trees that came tumbling along under them, falling to the ground and smashing through the trees below.

Josh's visor cleared as their jump flash faded away.

"Jump complete," Loki announced. "Convoy is dead ah..."

"FUCK!" Josh exclaimed, his eyes going wide. Directly ahead of them were several mammoth trees, each standing more than twenty meters taller than the others in the surrounding forest. He quickly rolled the Falcon onto its starboard side, barely managing to pass between two of the towering Coporan trees.

"What the..." Loki exclaimed as one of the trees passed directly over their canopy only a few meters away. He could see the flashes of blue-white light from the other three Falcons jumping in behind them, against the tree branches as they streaked by.

The Falcon snap rolled back to the left, coming level once again.

"Holy shit!" Josh exclaimed. "They've got some big fucking trees, don't they!"

Loki ignored his pilot's comments, focusing on his console displays. They were closing in on the convoy rapidly. "Opening weapons bays; dropping busters! Engaging nose turret!"

Four small missiles, two each, dropped from the Falcon's port and starboard weapons bays, their engines igniting as their tiny winglets deployed. They immediately streaked ahead, slamming into four of the Jung armored vehicles only a few seconds later. As the enemy vehicles exploded, red-orange bolts of plasma from Falcon One's nose turret peppered the roadway, blowing it to pieces. The plasma bolts found their targets, and although they did not destroy

them they instantly superheated their surfaces, causing the men inside to perish as some of their body armor melted and burned them, while others simply burst into flames as the Falcon streaked over their heads and climbed away into the Coporan night sky.

The surviving vehicles continued down the roadway at top speed. Energy weapons turrets on top of several vehicles rotated to face behind and opened fire on the other three approaching Falcons as, one by one, they too released their weapons and opened fire with their nose turrets.

“Did you see that?” Josh exclaimed as they continued to climb. “We blew the shit outta them!”

“Loop back and continue your climb,” Loki instructed. “Fast movers coming in from three four zero, twelve thousand, ten clicks out.”

“Got it.”

“We’ve got two intercepts left,” Loki continued. “Get our nose on them so I can lock on.”

“No problem,” Josh replied as their climb became inverted. Just before the top of their arc, Josh snap rolled the Falcon right-side up and continued to climb at a thirty degree angle.

“I’ve got them,” Loki announced. “Six targets, total. Targeting two. Firing intercepts.”

Two more missiles dropped out of the Falcon’s weapons bays and streaked away on fiery tails of white-hot thrust. The intercept missiles crossed the now nine kilometer gap between the Falcon and the incoming Jung fighters in a

matter of seconds. The first missile slammed into the lead Jung fighter, but the second one missed.

“Damn!” Loki swore. “One missed!”

“We can jump in and take them!” Josh urged.

“No time!”

“*Convoy destroyed!*” Falcon Seven reported over the comms.

“Five Jung fighters inbound!” Loki warned.

“Falcons, One, Three, Five, and Seven,” the flight controller called over the comms. “Ten seconds to Dragon... Jump, jump, jump!”

“We’re outta here!” Loki declared as he activated an emergency jump, engulfing their ship in blue-white light.

Four jump flashes lit up the night sky, leaving behind the burning wrecks of the Jung convoy on the roadway below. The scene became eerily quiet as the deafening ‘crack’ of the jumps faded away. Only the sounds of the burning wreckage, and the cries of the dying could be heard. In the distance, the sounds of the battle that had been raging at the Jung base only a few kilometers away had all but faded.

“Captain, relay from Ground Command. Clear for Dragon,” Naralena reported.

“Lieutenant Commander?” Nathan said, facing aft and looking at Jessica.

“Executing Dragon, aye,” she replied. “Mister Chiles?”

“Executing roll maneuver,” the helmsman answered.

The image of the moon Copora moved around the outer edges of the main view screen, tracking along the bottom from left to right, up the right side, and across the top, coming to rest directly over their heads.

“Locking main guns on target,” Jessica reported. “Firing.”

Lieutenant Kellen, leader of the second Ghatazhak strike team watched from their safe fallback position five hundred meters away from the Jung base. Over the last five minutes, he and his men had feigned a disorderly retreat, lulling the unsuspecting Jung soldiers defending the base into a false sense of victory. Now, he witnessed the complete destruction of the base as bolts of plasma rained down from orbit as the Aurora bombarded the helpless base into a massive pile of smoldering rubble. Debris shot high into the air, spreading out in all directions, as the plasma shots continued to fall from above, one after the other.

The bombardment ended only a minute after it had begun. When the dust cloud finally began to disperse, there was nothing recognizable left. Even the surrounding collection of shops and residences that had survived by supporting the base were destroyed. Several thousand Jung soldiers, and mostly likely several hundred Coporan civilians, both within the base and living around the perimeter, were either dead or trapped beneath the rubble.

“We should have done that from the start,” the lieutenant’s master sergeant said, as he stared at the pile of rubble in the distance.

“Agreed,” the lieutenant said. “These Terrans are too careful, too worried about how their actions are perceived by those who survive.” He turned and looked at the master sergeant. “It is not the way of the Ghatazhak.”

“As the commander said, ‘changing times require changing tactics.’”

“Perhaps,” the lieutenant replied, “but the Ghatazhak win because we are willing to do what must be done. Two hundred of our fellow Ghatazhak just died because the son of a Terran president, and a Takaran noble, could not commit to the level of force required to guarantee overwhelming success.”

“Dumar is hardly a noble,” the master sergeant reminded his lieutenant. “He comes from a commoner’s lineage, just as the Ghatazhak do.”

“He serves a nobleman, does he not? He lives as one, does he not?”

“We are programmed to obey his orders,” the master sergeant cautioned.

“And obey them we shall,” the lieutenant agreed. “To like them? That is not a requirement.”

“Firing sequence complete,” Jessica reported from the Aurora’s tactical station.

Nathan turned back around toward the main view screen. “Put the targeting camera on the main view screen.”

A separate window appeared in the middle of the main view screen showing an aerial view of the target on the surface of Copora. In the middle of the screen was a massive pile of rubble where the base had once stood. It was obscured by a cloud of smoke and dust that was already being blown aside by the constant breezes that swept across the excessively flat, large, Earth-like moon. The damage spread well beyond the base itself, out into the shops and residences surrounding it. Nathan cringed inside at the devastation, knowing full well that he would have to

deal with the accusations that would undoubtedly be thrown at him by the leaders of Copora. Despite the obvious disdain for their Jung conquerors—as evidenced by their media, as well as in communications the Alliance had intercepted over the past few weeks—the people of this world had not asked to be liberated. It was unfortunate that the Alliance had little choice but to make the decision for them. The 61 Cygni system was too close to Sol, a mere eleven point four light years away. Enough time had already passed for word of the existence of the Terran jump drive to reach the Jung ships in this system, had a message been dispatched when the Aurora had first returned from the Pentaurus cluster.

“Estimated collateral damage?” Nathan wondered.

“Based on the blast radius, the diameter of the ejecta, and the original estimated population density of the area... maybe a few thousand civilian casualties,” Mister Navashee answered solemnly.

“The Ghatazhak did try to take the base without the strike,” Jessica reminded the captain. “Dragon was not our first choice.”

“I have a feeling that isn’t going to help, much,” Nathan said. “Hell of a way to start new relations with one of the core worlds.”

“A core world that was host to a sizable Jung strike force, within a few months travel of Sol,” Jessica also reminded.

“Perhaps,” Nathan relented. He sighed, then turned toward Naralena at the comm station. “Comms, message to Ground Command. Dragon complete.”

“Aye, sir,” Naralena responded.

“Green deck,” Nathan ordered. “Let’s get some more support down there and start cleaning things up.”

"All Falcons, Flight," the flight controller's voice called over the comms. *"Pursue and eliminate remaining Jung fighters so we can send in reinforcements and aid. Sending target data."*

Loki watched his comm screen as the coordinates for their targets were transmitted from the Aurora's flight operations center directly to their navigation and targeting systems.

"Coordinates coming in," Loki reported. "Forwarding intercept data to your console."

"I've got it," Josh answered. He glanced to his right, at Falcons Three, Five, and Seven, flying in formation alongside, in low orbit over Copora, after having jumped away just before the Aurora began her bombardment of the Jung base on the surface. "See you guys back at Porto Santo," Josh told them.

"Good hunting," one of the other pilots responded.

"Flight, Falcon One; en route to intercept."

Josh fired his braking thrusters for several seconds, then pushed the Falcon's nose down and rolled to port, starting a turning dive.

"Jump point in five," Loki announced.

"I'll be on it," Josh assured him.

Four seconds later, he was, and the Falcon was again washed in blue-white light as they jumped down toward their targets.

Josh's visor became clear again as their jump flash faded away. The interceptor shook violently for a moment, as it suddenly found itself in atmospheric flight again. The heavy vibrations smoothed out, and Josh felt the sluggishness in his flight control stick fade as air flow was once again established over their atmospheric flight control surfaces.

Josh loved flying in space, but more and more, he was finding that he loved aerodynamic flight equally as well. The Falcon was an amazing ship, capable of just about anything. A flick of his wrist and a change in thrust, and the Falcon would respond with eagerness and precision. Even better, the jump drive and the lift thrusters could get Loki and him in and out of trouble in a heartbeat. No pilot could ask for a better ship.

He could see it in the eyes of the other pilots in the Falcon wing as well. They had all been Talon pilots for the Corinari, and had been equally enamored with their aircraft. In fact, most of them had balked at the idea of flying the fifty year-old deep-space interceptor, laughing at their ancient avionics and power plants. The jump drives had been the first thing to change their minds in favor of the 402s, or 'Falcons' as they had become known in their latest jump-capable incarnation. That, and the upgraded avionics, sensors, and weapons that the Takarans had provided. In addition, the removal of two of the 402's propellant tanks had allowed its weapons bays to be enlarged, doubling its armaments.

Today, however, they had mostly carried the 'buster' missiles used to destroy armored and other hardened targets. They had already used all four of their intercept missiles in earlier engagements over the skies of Gastien. Doing so had even scored them three confirmed air-to-air kills. This time, they would be using guns... both their nose turret and the mini-plasma cannons in their wings.

Josh slowly pulled back on the flight control stick, bring the Falcon out of its dive, shaving off energy and airspeed in the process.

"Two contacts," Loki reported. "Five degrees to starboard and fifty meters up. Fifty kilometers out. Turning toward us."

"Coming five right and angling up," Josh answered as he adjusted their course to intercept the two approaching Jung fighters. "You gotta wonder why they're even bothering. I mean, they've got no support base, no ships left in the system, and they've gotta be getting low on fuel by now."

"They're firing," Loki warned. "Four missiles inbound. Impact in thirty seconds."

"Are they stupid?" Josh wondered. "Firing from this far out?"

"Twenty-five seconds."

"Micro-jump us forward," Josh instructed. "Put us five hundred meters in front of them."

"I can't," Loki warned. "We're moving too fast."

"Calculate the jump for half our current speed... I've got an idea."

"What idea..."

"In five!"

"Fuck, not again," Loki mumbled as he activated one of their standard, pre-programmed micro-jumps. "Jumping in three..."

Josh pressed the manual override on the lift thrusters, then swiped his gloved finger across the thruster vector control pad, swinging all four lift thrusters as far forward as possible. He pulled his flight control stick back slightly to pitch their nose up forty-five degrees as he quickly brought the thrust levers to full power.

"What the hell are you doing?" Loki cried out.

"Slowing us down!"

"Jesus!" Loki replied, hanging onto either side of his console to brace himself against the sudden deceleration.

"Be ready on the nose turret!"

"Jumping," Loki announced as his visor went opaque, and the jump flash washed over them.

Josh's visor cleared a moment later, revealing the two Jung fighters only twenty meters below, seconds from passing under them. Without reducing power, he killed the two lift thrusters under the Falcon's starboard side, causing the interceptor—which was still sliding along a level flight path in a forty-five degree, nose-up attitude—to spin around and backwards, its belly facing the two Jung fighters that had just passed under them. He opened up the starboard lift thrusters again, swinging all four of them downward to help maintain their altitude as well as to avoid increasing the lateral speed as they continued to slide along backwards, their nose still pitched up forty-five degrees.

The interceptor shook violently throughout the maneuver as the airflow over its lifting body was forced to move in directions its designers had never intended. Loki twisted the control stick for their nose turret, causing it to roll over one hundred and eighty degrees in order to angle its double barrels downward toward the fleeing Jung fighters. He watched as the targeting reticle locked onto the fighter to the left and turned red. He pressed the firing button on top of the control stick, and the enemy fighter burst apart. The second fighter rolled and pitched down and away, making a run for lower altitudes. "The other one's getting away!" Loki exclaimed. "He's in a diving turn to starboard! He's going for the deck! He's getting away!"

"The fuck he is!" Josh insisted, pulling out both power levers and letting go of the flight controls.

Without input to the Falcon's flight-control surfaces, they automatically returned to a neutral state, allowing the airflow over the ship's lifting body shape to return to normal. The lack of thrust from the lifting thrusters allowed the airflow to push their nose back, but they were now flying backwards, and still being bounced about. Josh straightened

his right leg, jamming his right rudder pedal as far in as possible. The Falcon's tail slid to port, and a slight forward pressure on his flight control stick brought their nose down just enough for the aerodynamic forces acting upon their craft to swing it around into a normal, forward-facing, diving attitude along their path of flight. Josh pushed the nose down harder and rolled to port, this time jamming his left foot in to force their tail to slide hard to starboard. He again fired all four of his lift thrusters to keep them in an abnormally tight turn, one that the Falcon was never designed to perform.

"That's it!" Loki cried. "You've got him! Punch it!"

Josh slammed the throttle for the main engines all the way forward, causing them to accelerate rapidly. He pulled out all power to the lift thrusters again, now that they were in a stable, aerodynamic flight.

"We're gaining on him!" Loki declared. "He's going evasive!"

"I can track with him..."

"Just hold your course, Josh!" Loki insisted.

Josh did as he was told, trusting his friend to take out the fleeing fighter.

Loki moved the targeting reticle back and forth, trying to lock on the jinking Jung fighter as it danced about his targeting screen. "Fuck it!" he declared and opened fire, holding the button down as he swept to and fro, up and down, desperately trying to catch the bouncing fighter as they both dove toward the surface of Copora.

"Hurry up and kill that fucker!" Josh exclaimed. "We're running out of altitude!"

Loki smiled, took his finger off the fire button, and pulled the gun control stick back slightly, leading the target in the direction that he would have to turn to avoid smashing into

the ground below. The Jung fighter twisted slightly right and pitched up to stop its dive, sliding into Loki's targeting reticle. The reticle flashed red, and Loki fired once more, destroying the fighter.

"Fuck yes!" Josh cried out as he too began to pitch up to end their dive. "Nice shootin', Tex!"

"Damn!" Loki exclaimed as he activated their comms. "Flight, Falcon One, splash two!"

Josh pulled their ship level, skimming the treetops for a few moments before starting to climb again.

"Who's Tex?" Loki wondered, still grinning from ear to ear.

"I think he's a friend of Lieutenant Commander Nash. She's always sayin' that."

Commander Telles gazed out the window of the combat jumper as it circled around the outskirts of the small village that surrounded the now-destroyed Jung base. Fires burned, both in the main pile of rubble in the middle of the village where the base had once stood, as well as in several of the damaged civilian structures that surrounded it. Coporan fire crews fought to contain the conflagrations in an effort to keep them from spreading to neighboring structures. Rescue teams pulled at the loose rubble, attempting to free people trapped underneath. The injured lay in the streets, friends and neighbors doing what they could to provide care.

With the skies of Copora now free of Jung fighters, reinforcements had already arrived and had begun to provide some level of security, both in the streets of Gastien, as well as the streets of the village surrounding the former Jung base. As they circled, the second medical shuttle was already landing, and in moments would be

unloading Corinairan doctors, nurses, and medical technicians, as well as thousands of initial therapeutic doses of nanites.

Unfortunately, it would likely not be enough. Although the devastation in the village surrounding the Jung base was considerable, there was similar collateral damage at several other locations on Copora. The fires at the capitol building had jumped to nearby structures as well, all of which were still burning when the commander had left the command post in the center of the capital. The Jung air base was also devastated, although there was little loss in the way of civilian life there.

In fact, the Ghatazhak had simultaneously attacked six Jung strongholds on this night, and there were still more than a dozen smaller bases left to deal with. However, none of them had significant forces, most of them being communications or supply depots. Before the morning sun rose again over this part of the moon, all of those bases would be under Alliance control, thanks to the Ghatazhak, and the Falcons.

The combat jumper finished its perimeter flight and turned inward toward the landing site that had been set up a few hundred meters from the center of the village. As they descended, the crew chief activated the side doors, causing them to slide aft out of the way, opening either side of the main bay of the jumper to the night air. Dust swirled as the jumper set down, its lift turbines screaming. Commander Telles and Master Sergeant Jahal stepped out of the jumper and moved away at a brisk pace as the jumper immediately climbed back into the sky to begin circling the village once more.

"Damn," Master Sergeant Jahal said under his breath as they walked through the makeshift triage area. "The

Aurora's guns fucked this place up."

"What was the last casualty estimate?" Commander Telles wondered as they walked.

"One hundred and twenty KIA, three hundred and four wounded."

"Nearly half our battalion," the commander observed.

"Closer to one third," the master sergeant insisted, "especially considering that most of our wounded will become combat effective once their prophylactic nanite doses have a chance to do their stuff." Master Sergeant Jahal stopped and looked around at the civilian casualties lying on the ground, waiting for their turn to be treated. "I don't suppose you want to know how many civilian casualties there were?"

"Not really," Commander Telles replied, "however, I expect that Captain Scott will want to know."

"Last update was just over fifteen hundred dead or unaccounted for, and twice that in wounded."

"Understood," the commander said.

"You can expect those numbers to go up over the next few hours," the master sergeant added. "I'd be surprised if they haven't doubled by sunup."

"Such is the nature of war," Commander Telles replied.

"If we had simply bombed the base from orbit from the start, the civilians wouldn't have had any warning. There would be a lot more among the dead."

Commander Telles stopped, turning to look at the master sergeant. "And we would have far fewer dead Ghatazhak. I hope that being around the Terrans has not softened you up, Jahal."

"Of course not, Commander," the master sergeant insisted. He stepped closer to the commander, looking him squarely in the eyes. "You know better."

“Just checking, Master Sergeant.” Commander Telles turned back to continue walking.

“As you should, Commander.”

“I suppose the collateral damage is of concern, in the political sense,” the commander admitted, “considering that the captain will be inviting the people of this world to join the fight against the Jung.”

“My thinking exactly, sir,” the master sergeant agreed, following his commanding officer as they weaved their way through the triage area.

Their course eventually took them away from the triage area, and into the masses of walking wounded, all of whom stared at the sight of the menacing-looking Ghatazhak commander and his master sergeant, in their flat-black body armor, hi-tech battle helmets, and energy rifles slung over their shoulders.

A tired-looking old man, covered with his own blood from a loosely bandaged wound, as well as the blood of those he had tried to help along the way, looked up at the commander as he walked by. He nodded at Commander Telles. “Thank you.”

The old man’s comment caught the Ghatazhak commander slightly off-guard. He turned and looked down at the old man as he walked. “You are welcome, sir.”

“Now, that’s a first,” Master Sergeant Jahal mumbled as they walked. “A civilian thanking a Ghatazhak.”

“Thank you,” another battered and bloody man sitting near the old man added.

Commander Telles nodded at the second gentleman. More ‘thank you’s’ followed as the commander and the master sergeant continued on their path through the injured Coporans. Finally, an older woman just ahead of them called out.

“Is it over?”

Commander Telles stopped in his tracks, looking at the woman for a moment. “Yes, it is over, ma’am.”

The old woman locked eyes with the commander. “Who are you?”

Commander Telles stared at the woman for a moment, considering his answer. “We are with the Alliance.”

CHAPTER TWO

Prince Casimir studied the documents on the data tablet. "The Glendanon has only been back for a few days, and already the Tannan propellant is being tested for use in Takaran and Corinairan propulsion systems?" Casimir looked at his advisors. "I expected it to take weeks to reach that phase."

"The Darvano and Savoy systems are quite eager to get their hands on that propellant. Especially the Savoy system," Mister Ullumbrach explained. "Their prices have been controlled by our markets for some time, due to the fact that they have never had the ability to sell their products elsewhere. Now that they have that ability, they desperately need not only ships with which to deliver their goods, but the propellant to drive those ships."

"But neither Ancot nor Corinair yet have the shipping capacities needed," Casimir insisted.

"Corinair now has three jump-capable transports, including the Glendanon," Mister Rostaur stated. "Savoy has but one. However, many of their potential customers from beyond the cluster, such as Palee, Haven, and Volon, are already in negotiations with the Ancotan trade commission. Volon has even dispatched two FTL ships in anticipation of a deal being in place prior to their arrival. They will need to be refueled, hence the urgent need for propellant that is *not* provided by Takaran markets."

"And that is because...?" Casimir asked.

"If Takaran buyers of Ancotan grains are forced to pay higher prices in order to gain priority over, say, Volonese

buyers, they will undoubtedly counter by raising the price of propellant being sold to the Ancotans, thereby increasing the cost of operation for the Ancotans.”

“Won’t that drive up the price for everyone, including Takaran buyers?” Casimir wondered.

“Perhaps, but the nobles do not see it that way.”

“As usual,” Casimir mumbled, “they see only short-term profits, rather than long-term stability.”

“I’m afraid that they are still in what we refer to as ‘imperial mode’,” Mister Rostaur explained. “The nobles are accustomed to dealing with the vagaries of Caius, which could, and often did, change overnight. Thinking ‘long-term’ was to take great financial risk.”

Casimir sighed. “I often wonder how the nobles acquired their wealth and power to begin with, considering their limited thinking.”

“The nobles are not stupid,” Mister Ullumbrach warned.

“Of course not,” Casimir agreed.

“And neither was Caius,” Mister Ullumbrach added. “He lined their coffers and kept them hooked on a steady stream of anti-aging serum. ‘Wealth and long life’... Both were reliable insurers of loyalty.”

“Many wish to see the days of the empire return,” Mister Rostaur added, “not under Caius, of course...”

“But definitely not under myself, either,” Casimir concluded.

Neither of his advisors wished to verbally confirm their leader’s conclusion, but offered agreement by nod of their heads.

“Worry not,” Casimir assured his advisors, “for I have not the desire, financial wealth, nor wealth of productive years ahead of me to lead such fools into prosperity, especially against their very will.”

"If not you, personally, then perhaps your house?" Mister Rostaur suggested.

"Deliza?" Casimir replied, holding back a laugh. "She is still a child. Besides, she is far more interested in matters of science than those of politics and economies."

"She is quite an intelligent young woman," Mister Rostaur insisted. "I grant you, she is young. However, that will not always be the case. Besides, if she can understand astrophysics and systems engineering, then she can certainly be taught to understand socioeconomics and interstellar politics."

"The worst leader a society can have is one who assumes the role by requirement, rather than by choice," Casimir said, "regardless of their qualifications. I shall not pass that burden onto my children. The people, not the nobles, of Takara will have to figure out a way to govern themselves fairly. The Takar system ceased being a 'settlement' centuries ago, and so did its need for a single, all powerful ruler. The concept of nobles and commoners should have been abolished long before I was born."

"The nobles will never willingly relinquish their positions," Mister Ullumbrach warned.

"Unless we can convince them that it is their only means of continued prosperity," Casimir insisted, "perhaps even their very survival."

Both of Prince Casimir's aides looked at one another, the full impact of their leader's words evident on their faces.

"Do not worry, gentlemen," Casimir assured them, "I am not about to hold a gun to their heads... Although I have considered it on occasion."

The door to Casimir's office opened, and a middle-aged man wearing the uniform of House Ta'Akar stepped inside. "Excuse me, sir, but you requested to see Mister Hiller?"

"Yes, indeed." Casimir looked at his advisors. "Gentlemen, I thank you both. We shall meet again, tomorrow."

"Of course, sir," Mister Ullumbrach, the senior of the two advisors, replied as both men rose to leave.

The middle-aged man in uniform pulled the door open widely, allowing Mister Hiller to enter the room while Mister Ullumbrach and Mister Rostaur departed.

"Yanni," Casimir called, his previously serious tone suddenly becoming lighter and more friendly. Casimir had a genuine liking for the young Terran, as did, he had noticed, his oldest daughter, Deliza. The two of them spent much time together, discussing numerous topics of interest to them both. It was the first time that Casimir had ever seen his daughter interested in anything other than science and technology. He was sure that it was due in large part to the young Terran's personality. The man was full of life and enamored with knowledge itself, as was Casimir's daughter.

"You wished to speak with me, sir?" Yanni asked politely as he entered the room.

"Yes, thank you for coming. I hope I didn't pull you from your work?"

"Not at all, sir," Yanni assured the prince. "There is really very little for me to do now. I believe that your people are now far more qualified to care for the cores than am I."

"I see," Casimir said. He gestured toward a seating area near the big windows that overlooked the city of Answari only a few kilometers distant. "Please, sit."

"Thank you, sir."

"Then I take it the project is going well?" Casimir inquired, already knowing the answer.

"Quite well," Yanni replied. "The copy process is nearly complete, and the translation of the data into Angla passed

the forty percent mark just this morning. Translation into other languages, such as Takaran, will take longer, I'm afraid. Angla is so similar to English that the translation process is much faster than into other languages."

"We are all very excited to see what new technologies the Data Ark has preserved for us all these centuries," Casimir exclaimed. "Much is riding on what is found on those cores."

"From what little I have seen thus far, I am sure you will not be disappointed," Yanni assured him.

"Then you have seen what knowledge the Ark holds?"

"Not all of it, of course," Yanni explained. "However, I have scanned several of the directories, and even read a few of the more discipline-specific summaries... Mostly at the request of Deliza, I have to admit."

"Yes, she can be quite persistent," Casimir agreed. "So, based on what you *have* seen, the technologies contained within the Ark are more advanced?"

"Not all of them," Yanni warned, "but, yes, many of the technologies are far more advanced than anything Deliza knows to exist in the Pentaurus sector, and more advanced than anything known to exist in the Sol sector as well. Of course, the ability to exploit such technologies first requires the implementation of lesser levels of technology, in order to support the more advanced production methods needed. This is why the people of my world decided to establish the Ark Foundation, to better control the release of these technologies to the world. Some of them, if not carefully controlled, could have easily led to our own destruction," Yanni further explained. "In fact, many believe that the sudden, explosive, technological growth that occurred on Earth is what brought the Jung to our doorstep. So you see, their concerns were not unwarranted."

“Yes, yes,” Casimir agreed. “Technology often requires wisdom and maturity. Unfortunately, they never seem to be a prerequisite. The Followers of Origin believe that it is this very lack of wisdom and maturity that led to the downfall of humanity due to the bio-digital plague.”

“Many on Earth believe much the same,” Yanni said. “They believe that God brought the bio-digital plague onto them because human technology had already far outpaced human maturity.”

“And who is to say that they are not correct?”

“Others believe that the ability to develop technologies capable of wiping out the human race acts as a self-limiting evolutionary device. If humanity is out of control, and its technology is surpassing its maturity, an event such as the bio-digital plague will serve as a trigger, resetting technological levels accordingly.”

“Interesting concept,” Casimir admitted. A small laugh left his mouth. “I can see why my daughter enjoys your company.”

“Deliza is a delightful young lady,” Yanni said, somewhat awkwardly.

“Yes, she is,” Casimir agreed. “I wonder, at times, if Takara is mature enough, responsible enough to be entrusted with the knowledge contained with those files,” he said, shaking his head in doubt.

“More so than the people of Earth,” Yanni said, “at least from a technological standpoint.”

“I was thinking more about the political and socioeconomic ramifications of that knowledge.”

“I would think that much of the knowledge contained within the cores would change Takara for the better,” Yanni surmised.

“Some of the nobles fear what is on those cores.”

“Why?”

Casimir sighed. “They fear that newer, more advanced technologies might replace the ones upon which their financial successes depend.”

“Even if such technologies improve the lives of every Takaran?” Yanni asked.

“Takaran nobles do not care about every Takaran,” Casimir explained, “only a select few... Usually ones that share their family name. I have no doubt that some would do whatever it took to bury whatever technologies might jeopardize their revenue streams, regardless of the ‘good’ it might do for Takara, or for that matter the entire cluster, as a whole.”

“It is hard to imagine that anyone could be that short-sighted.”

Casimir laughed. “Do not go into politics, Mister Hiller. You will be greatly disappointed if you do.” Casimir leaned back in his chair. “Tell me, how much do you think the nobles know about the contents of the Data Ark?”

“Security at the project is tight,” Yanni insisted, “even more so than it was on Earth. I would be surprised if any information had leaked out.”

“Yet, many of the scientists and technicians assigned to the project are not of my house,” Casimir reminded him.

“True, but it is my understanding that none of them are from rival houses. They are all, as you say, from common houses?”

“Again, true. However, such men could be easily tempted to sell what they know to curry favor from noble houses. Financial reward, appointment of position, even marriage into a noble family... These are all ways that men from common houses can transform themselves into Takaran nobility.”

"I was not aware." Yanni's eyes squinted slightly. "However, is it not the intent to share the knowledge contained within the Data Ark with all the people of the Pentaurus cluster? It was, after all, a requirement of the Alliance charter, was it not?"

"Indeed, it was," Casimir assured him. "However, was that not also a requirement for your 'Foundation' as well?"

"It was."

"And did your foundation share *all* knowledge from the Ark with *every* Terran?"

"As I said, it was decided that the release of knowledge would be controlled in order to avoid catastrophe. However, I do see your point, sir." Yanni looked at his watch.

"I was sure that you would, Mister Hiller."

"If there is nothing further, sir. I am supposed to meet Deliza for lunch shortly."

"Ah yes, we would not want to keep Deliza waiting," Casimir smiled. "I thank you for your time, Mister Hiller. It is always better to get reports directly from those involved, rather than through digital means. So many of the subtleties are lost."

"It was my pleasure, sir," Yanni said as he stood to leave.

Casimir also stood, shaking Yanni's hand. "Good day, Mister Hiller."

Casimir watched as Yanni stepped through the open door, and the middle-aged man in uniform closed it behind him, then turned to face his prince. "A bright and honest young man," Prince Casimir commented as he moved toward his desk.

"Too honest, if you ask me," the man in uniform said as he too moved toward Casimir's desk.

"Major Bellen, you do not trust Mister Hiller?"

"I trust him to do what he *believes* to be the right thing to do," the major replied. "I do not trust him to always know what the best thing to do actually *is*."

"Agreed. A wise distinction, to be sure."

"Sire, I know I am only a military man, unschooled in matters of interstellar politics and economics..."

"Soren, please," Casimir insisted, "I have known you longer than anyone in this house, even longer than Dumar. Do not let the fact that you appear younger than me—despite the fact that I was but a boy when you were first assigned to this house—cause you to forget that you are my elder. After all, this is the third change in administration that you have witnessed, is it not? I would think that you are more qualified than most in such matters. If not by education, then by experience alone."

"Would not the nobles be more likely to support the Alliance if they knew exactly what technologies were contained within the Data Ark?"

"And if those technologies *did* threaten their financial stability?"

"If given ample warning," Major Bellen explained, "perhaps even in advance of the rest of Takara, their fortunes could be protected in the face of such change in economies."

"Perhaps," Casimir replied. "However, my father once told me that a man motivated by fear is far more unpredictable than one motivated by greed."

* * *

Nathan stood at the forward end of the Aurora's main hangar bay as the combat shuttle rolled to a stop and opened its main port-side door. Five Ghatazhak soldiers in

full combat armor stepped down from the shuttle and promptly stepped aside to make room for Admiral Dumar to disembark.

The admiral stepped down from the combat shuttle and glanced around the bay, spotting Nathan near the main entrance along the forward bulkhead.

Nathan stiffened, and raised his hand in salute at the presence of his commanding officer.

Dumar walked up to Nathan, returning the salute, and then offering his hand. "I suppose it is necessary to maintain protocol," he said as they shook hands.

"Especially in the early days of the Alliance," Nathan replied. "The commander's shuttle is coming in now," he added, pointing to the second combat jump shuttle rolling toward them from the far end of the massive hangar bay.

Admiral Dumar turned aft to see the combat shuttle rolling toward them. "The liberation of 61 Cygni went quite well."

"It could have gone better," Nathan admitted. "I agree with Commander Telles's assessment that it was a mistake to attempt to capture the Jung base, rather than destroying it from orbit from the start."

"We did not know if their base had shields," the admiral reminded him. "If it had, we might well have lost the opportunity for a surprise attack. The Aurora had to deal with the cruisers first. There was no way around that fact. Besides, the delay probably allowed the civilians nearest the base to move to safe distances prior to the orbital strike."

"The KIA count is up to one hundred and thirty-two Ghatazhak," Nathan reported, "Another hundred and seventy-four will be combat ineffective for several weeks while nanites repair their injuries."

"And civilian losses?"

"Just over two thousand confirmed, with another three hundred or so still unaccounted for."

"It has raised since yesterday," the admiral said, his eyebrow rising.

"Yes, but it has leveled off somewhat over the last few hours. Sensor teams are convinced that the rubble around the outside of the Jung base is free of bodies. However, it will take some time to clean up the rubble of the Jung base and dispose of the bodies. I suspect we will find additional Coporan casualties among the Jung dead as well."

"Still, had we simply attacked all targets from orbit, the collateral damage would have been significantly higher," the admiral insisted. "In addition, I believe the sight of the Ghatazhak in action had great psychological impact on the people of Copora as well. It is necessary for their leaders to see a strong Alliance, if we expect them to join in our fight against the Jung."

"Which is why you came to meet with them in person, is it not?"

Dumar turned to look at Nathan, a slight smile on his face. "No offense, Captain, but you still look a bit young to be in command of a warship such as this, let alone the entire Alliance."

"None taken, sir," Nathan replied.

The second combat shuttle pulled up and parked next to the first, its side door sliding open as well. Four fully armored Ghatazhak soldiers stepped out, followed by Commander Telles and an elderly gentleman in Coporan civilian attire.

The commander and the Coporan man walked up to Admiral Dumar and Captain Scott. Commander Telles stepped to one side, allowing the Coporan to face the admiral and the captain directly.

"Minister Abrahms, allow me to introduce Admiral Travon Dumar, commander of the Alliance forces in the Sol sector, and Captain Nathan Scott, commanding officer of the Aurora. Admiral, Captain, may I present Mister Arturi Abrahms, Minister of Copora."

"It is an honor to meet you, Minister Abrahms," Admiral Dumar said, extending his hand in friendship.

"Am I a prisoner?" the minister inquired, without offering his hand in return.

"No sir, you are free to leave, if you so choose."

"Then, if I so choose, you will return me to Copora?"

"Indeed we shall," Admiral Dumar replied.

"And, if I so choose, you will remove your forces from the surface of my world, as well as from the 61 Cygni system?"

"If you so choose, yes. However, I would strongly urge you to hear what we have to say before you make any such decisions, as the continued survival of your world is quite likely to depend upon the decisions that you make this day."

The minister looked into the eyes of both the admiral and the captain standing before him. He then looked at Commander Telles. "I wish to return to Copora," he declared, looking at the admiral again.

"You are sure about that?" the admiral wondered, appearing somewhat surprised by the minister's request.

"Quite sure," he replied with determination.

Admiral Dumar sighed. "Very well." The admiral looked at Commander Telles. "Commander, deliver the minister back to Gastien as quickly as possible."

"Yes, sir," Commander Telles replied, saluting.

The minister looked unsure. "I also wish you to remove all troops from the surface."

"As you wish. Just as soon as Commander Telles is satisfied that all Jung personnel have been killed or

captured.”

Minister Abrahms looked at the admiral, suspicion in his eyes. “And after that, your ships shall leave our system?”

“The Aurora is the only ship currently in your system,” the admiral promised. “It shall depart after the last of the Ghatazhak have returned from Copora. You have my word.”

“Minister?” Commander Telles said, gesturing toward their combat jumper, which was already beginning to restart its engines for departure.

The minister looked at Commander Telles, then at the shuttle as its engines began to spin up. He turned as if to head back to the shuttle, but hesitated. He turned back to face the admiral once again. “Perhaps, since I am already here, I will listen to what you have to say, as I am quite sure that the people of Copora will want some answers as to why their world was invaded yet again.”

“We would be more than happy to provide you with those answers, and much more,” Admiral Dumar promised.

“Very well, I shall stay... for now,” the minister declared.

“Excellent,” the admiral replied. “If you’ll follow these men, they will escort you to the command briefing room. We shall join you there shortly.”

They watched as two of the Ghatazhak soldiers escorted the minister out of the main hangar bay.

“Are they all like him?” Nathan asked Commander Telles.

“If you mean pompous and indecisive, then no,” the commander replied. “Those characteristics appear to be unique to Mister Abrahms.”

“Are you sure he is their leader?” Admiral Dumar asked.

“He is the only one who answered our broadcast,” the commander replied. “Only time will tell.”

* * *

A flock of large, reddish-brown birds cruised lazily over the canyon floor. Towering, rocky slopes on either side funneled the winds through the narrow portions of the canyons ahead, providing a consistent breeze that the massive predators used to hover nearly effortlessly as they scanned the surface for their next meal.

The bird leading the flock dipped its beak slightly downward and to the left, spotting a large, furry creature on the surface below, moving slowly as it made its way through the brush. The bird watched as it hovered in the breeze, waiting for the right moment.

The large, furry creature reached a clearing, paused, looked about, and then started to scurry across the open land, trying to get to the brush on the far side as quickly as possible. However, it failed to look upward.

The bird dipped its head down sharply as it pulled its wings back, decreasing its massive, two-meter-wide wingspan to less than a meter as it dove toward the surface. The other birds quickly followed, diving toward the furry creature running across the open ground below them.

The lead bird screamed out as if sounding a battle cry, spreading its wings wide again and dropping its tail as it spread its massive talons. It struck quickly, digging its talons into the back of the furry creature's neck, ripping at its skin and tearing it open.

The large, furry creature roared out in pain as blood spurt from the back of its neck. The lead bird let go, flapping its wings to climb away and make room for the next attacker. The furry creature rolled over on its back, bringing its own claws between it and the next attacker, slashing across the second bird's chest and tearing it open. The second bird fell to the side, flopping about on the ground as it bled out.

More birds swooped down, tearing at the furry creature with their sharp talons. The creature continued to defend itself, but there were too many of them. It was only a matter of time until...

A flash of blue-white light washed over the canyon, followed immediately by a thunderous clap. A shock wave of displaced air washed over the land, disturbing the usual wind patterns and sending the attacking birds scattering in all directions. The large, furry creature took advantage of the sudden disturbance in the birds' attack and ran with all its strength toward the brush on the other side of the clearing.

A high-pitched whine of engines echoed against the rocky walls, as the furry creature disappeared into the brush. A combat jump shuttle roared in, coming to a hover only two meters above the ground. Its side doors opened, and three Ghatazhak troops jumped out of each side, hitting the ground running. The shuttle immediately began to climb, pointing its nose upward and disappearing in another blue-white flash of light.

The Ghatazhak troops reached the same brush where the large furry creature had disappeared only moments ago, taking cover in the thick brush while they scanned the area for any signs of Jung troops.

Lieutenant Kellen scanned the area, his eyes watching the tactical readouts on the inside of his combat helmet visor. Satisfied that they had made it to the ground undetected, he signaled his master sergeant to come to him. As the master sergeant approached, the lieutenant raised his visor, deactivating the displays. "Confirmations?"

"Yes, sir. All four teams are down clean, and jumpers are away."

“Very well. Everyone shut down, dig in, and rest up. We wait for nightfall before we move out. We have a long way to go to reach the recon point.”

* * *

Nathan, Admiral Dumar, and Commander Telles crested the top of the ramp, stepping into the main intersection at the center of the Aurora’s command deck.

Lieutenant Commander Nash stepped out from the security office door at the corner of the intersection. “Sirs,” she said, calling their attention, “if I might speak with you a moment?”

“Which one of us?” Nathan wondered.

“All three of you, I guess.” Jessica looked at the admiral, remembered the memo on protocol, and saluted. “Admiral, sir.”

“A pleasure to see you again, Lieutenant Commander,” the admiral replied as he returned her salute.

Jessica turned next to Commander Telles, saluting him as well. “Commander.”

“I trust preparations for your upcoming mission are going well?” the admiral asked.

“That’s what I wanted to speak with you about,” Jessica told them as she led them into the security office. “Give us the room for a minute,” she ordered her staff as they entered. Jessica waited a moment for the three security officers to leave the compartment and close the door behind them before she continued. “I may need more time to prepare.”

“What seems to be the problem?” Admiral Dumar asked.

“Jung is a pain in the ass to pick up. The rules don’t make sense, it has strange, varying patterns of verb conjugation,

and some of the consonant pairings are really difficult to pronounce.”

“We don’t really have more time,” Nathan reminded her. “We’ve only got six weeks before that comm-probe reaches Tau Ceti. We need intel well before then.”

“With three inhabited worlds, the Tau Ceti system will be difficult to liberate,” Commander Telles added. “The fact that the Jung have been there for several decades will present additional challenges. If any EDF operatives are still alive on those worlds, we will need any intelligence they may have gathered.”

“Yeah, I know all that,” Jessica replied.

“Surely, there are plenty of people within the Tau Ceti system who do not speak perfect Jung,” Admiral Dumar pointed out.

“Yes, that is true. The people still speak their original languages in addition to Jung. However, improperly spoken Jung at an inopportune moment could seriously jeopardize the mission, if not the Alliance itself,” Jessica explained.

“Good point,” Nathan agreed. “So, the lessons aren’t going as well as expected?”

“Don’t get me wrong, Captain,” Jessica said. “Naralena speaks Jung like a native, but remember, she’s genetically skewed for languages. I’m not.”

“I thought you spoke three languages?” Nathan said.

“Four, actually, but none of them are like Jung. It makes some of the old Earth Middle Eastern languages look easy. It’s like a mixture of every difficult language that ever existed. I don’t know how the hell Naralena picked it up so quickly, even with her good genes.”

“Perhaps you should take her with you?” Admiral Dumar said.

“Naralena?” Nathan said, surprised by the admiral’s suggestion.

“You’re kidding, right?” Jessica added. “She’s a comm officer... One who never even went through basic training.”

“Volon is not a timid world,” Admiral Dumar stated. “If she grew up there, she has seen her fair share of violence.”

“Seeing violence, and actually committing acts of violence are not the same thing,” Jessica insisted.

“Volonese culture teaches basic self-defense from an early age,” Commander Telles said. “Much of the Ghatazhak hand-to-hand combat techniques derive from traditional Volonese martial arts.”

“I’d prefer that it didn’t come down to hand-to-hand,” Jessica said. “I’d be happier if she knew how to shoot a gun.”

“Perhaps she does?” Admiral Dumar said. “Being from Volon, it would not be a surprise.”

“Even if she’s a crack shot and can kick ass like a ninja, she knows nothing about covert operations,” Jessica reminded them.

“However, you do,” the admiral stated. “I assume that you will at least be able to understand spoken Jung by the time you depart?”

“I expect so, yes.”

“Then simply let Naralena do the talking,” Admiral Dumar suggested. “I imagine, given that not everyone in the Tau Ceti system speaks Jung, that it would not appear suspicious if only one of you spoke it fluently.”

Jessica sighed, obviously not comfortable with the idea. “If I have to babysit Naralena, that increases the risk.”

“Or decreases, depending on how you look at it,” the admiral said. “After all, her Jung would be far less likely to raise suspicion. You said so yourself.”

"Perhaps you should take a third operative with you?" Commander Telles suggested. "Someone that you know has the skills to defend your party... A Ghatazhak, perhaps?"

"No offense, Commander, but you guys are not exactly covert," Jessica replied. "More like shock troops, if you know what I mean. Besides, although I know I can trust a Ghatazhak to kick ass, I'm not sure I trust them to follow *my* orders."

"Then take someone you know," Nathan suggested. "Someone who has the skills and good judgment, and can follow orders."

"Like who?"

"Dozens of spec-ops have reported in to the volunteer centers on Earth," Nathan reminded her. "Surely one of them would be a good choice."

"Just because they're spec-ops doesn't mean I trust them," Jessica insisted.

"Perhaps you should start by asking Miss Avakian how she feels about the idea?" Commander Telles suggested. "If she does not feel up to the assignment, the selection of the third person is moot."

"She's an ensign now," Jessica pointed out.

"Pardon?"

"Naralena. The Alliance? Everyone has a rank now. She's Ensign Avakian now."

"I stand corrected," Commander Telles replied.

"Talk to her about it," Nathan said. "Get her reaction. If she's up for it, get her back to Porto Santo for some basic training. If you still feel you need a third, find someone you trust that has the training to back you up if things go south." Nathan looked at Commander Telles, "If that's alright with you, Commander."

"It should not be a problem, Captain," Commander Telles replied.

"Okay," Jessica acquiesced. "Why not?"

"If there is nothing else?" Admiral Dumar said.

"No, sirs. Thank you, sirs," Jessica responded.

Commander Telles opened the door and allowed the admiral to depart, following behind him.

"Not exactly the way I expected *that* conversation to go," Jessica said as Nathan also turned to leave.

Nathan turned back toward her as he left. "Make it work."

"Right," Jessica replied, "You know, there's not much room in that jump sub," she called out as Nathan left the room.

* * *

Josh gazed down at Copora as it passed quickly under their Falcon, cruising along only a few thousand meters above the surface. Rolling farmlands, punctuated by the gray and black outcroppings of rock that dotted the Coporan landscape stretched out to the far horizon. The moon was unlike any world he had visited before. Its colors, its patterns of day and night, even the massive gas giant and the two neighboring moons that seemed to make continual loops around their sky. It was definitely the most alien-feeling world he had ever seen. He wondered if people had felt the same about Haven, the moon on which he had been raised, upon their first visit.

"What do you think they grow down there?" Loki wondered aloud from the back seat of the Falcon's cockpit.

"I dunno. Doesn't *look* much like food... I know that. Nothing down there looks edible to me."

"Farmers don't only grow things for human consumption," Loki pointed out. "Sometimes they grow things to feed livestock."

"Have you seen any animals since we've been here?" Josh asked.

"Not really," Loki admitted. "At least not anything I'd want to eat, that's for sure." Loki checked his sensor displays. "Nothing abnormal in this sector."

"Heading for sector two five four," Josh announced as he initiated a gentle turn.

"I wonder what they eat here," Loki said as he adjusted his sensors to begin the sweep of the next sector.

"Not like we're ever going to get a chance to find out," Josh said, "Not with all the patrols we're flying. Not that I'm complaining, mind you. Like I said, nothing down there looks edible to me." Josh leaned forward, noticing something on the landscape ahead of them. "What the hell is that?"

"A hole."

"I know it's a hole," Josh replied. "What was it, before it was a hole?"

"A Jung outpost. Troops, a few patrol shuttles, munitions storage. There's at least a few dozen of them spread all over this moon."

"Not very big, was it?" Josh commented as they flew over the top of the blast crater.

"Not really. Most of these were taken out from orbit by the Aurora. I believe this one, being so remote, was taken out by Scout Three's plasma torpedo cannons."

"That would explain all the scorched ground around the blast crater," Josh said. "Not exactly precision weapons, you know."

"This sector shows clear as well," Loki announced. "Take us to two five six."

“Man, how long is this going to take?” Josh groaned. “We’ve been at this for two days now.”

“Until command is convinced that Copora is Jung free,” Loki replied.

“You mean ‘organized Jung forces’,” Josh corrected. “There could be a hundred Jung hiding out directly below us, and we wouldn’t know it.”

“You know what I mean,” Loki insisted. “‘Free of significant threat to the people of Copora,’” he added, quoting Major Prechitt from the mission briefing.

“I still don’t know why we didn’t just blast the Jung ships and call it a day,” Josh said. “It’s not like the troops on the ground are a threat to Earth... Not from eleven light years away.”

“Eleven point four,” Loki corrected, knowing it would irritate his friend. A mild groan confirmed it. “It was a show of force, meant to send a message to not only the Jung, but also to the Coporans... That the Alliance means business. At least, when dealing with the Jung. If you’re trying to sell a product, it’s best to make an impressive demonstration.”

“One that kills a few thousand civilians?”

Loki’s eyebrows furrowed. “Since when do you care about civilian casualties?”

“I don’t,” Josh admitted. “I’m just trying to understand the ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ of everything. Isn’t that what Major Prechitt wanted me to learn?”

“I stand corrected.” Loki examined his sensor display again, finding nothing of interest in his scans. “Two five seven, please.”

Josh groaned again.

* * *

Nathan entered the command briefing room only a few steps behind Commander Telles and Admiral Dumar. Minister Abrahms was seated at the conference table, already appearing impatient.

"Minister Abrahms," the admiral began, "I apologize for any inconvenience we have caused you..."

"Inconvenience?" the minister laughed. "There are nearly four thousand dead, and thousands more injured..."

"As well as many of my men," Commander Telles added.

Minister Abrahms looked at Commander Telles, already accustomed to the commander's steely gaze from the ride up from the surface. "Not to appear callous, Commander, but the Coporan people did not ask you and your men to invade our world. You took it upon yourself to..."

"Liberate your people?" Commander Telles offered.

"Are you saying your people liked living under Jung rule?" Admiral Dumar asked.

Minister Abrahms looked at the admiral. "I don't even know who you people are. 'The Alliance.' What Alliance? From where? Your very name implies some sort of interstellar coalition, but a coalition of what worlds? And why did you invade our world?"

"We did not 'invade' your world," Admiral Dumar insisted. "We did, however, neutralize the Jung forces that have been holding your world since it was captured three years ago."

"Neutralize?" the minister replied, obviously irritated by the admiral's choice of words. "Rather weak word, don't you think? Obliterate would be more like it, along with thousands of Coporans. None of whom, I am quite sure, have ever done anything to you."

"Minister..." the admiral began.

"What exactly did the Jung do to warrant your rather vicious attack?"

"They nearly destroyed my world," Nathan interrupted, anger spilling into his tone, "killing millions, I might add, not thousands."

"Really?" the minister replied, as if challenging the young captain's assertion. "And what world would that be?"

"Earth."

The minister was silent for a moment. "You cannot be from Earth," he finally said. "The Earth was the hardest hit of all the core worlds. We didn't even begin picking up simple radio emissions from it until about fifty years ago. Our last long-range scans showed that the people of Earth had not even gotten back into orbit yet."

"Things have changed," Nathan told him. "This ship was built by the people of Earth."

"Preposterous!" the minister exclaimed. "There is no way that the people of Earth went from pre-orbit to interstellar travel in only a few decades. Hell, it would take longer than that for even the most advanced sub-light ship to travel from Earth to Copora."

"Actually, it only takes us about a minute or two," Nathan told him. "Actually, more like a split second, but with the calculations and such... And you know how Ensign Riley loves to count down to the jump for dramatic effect," he added, looking at the admiral.

"Yes, I've noticed that," Admiral Dumar replied.

"You people believe this situation to be humorous?" Minister Abrahms exclaimed. "Is this a joke to you?"

"This is most decidedly not a joke," Commander Telles assured the minister. "Captain Scott, and the Aurora, are indeed from Earth."

"And you are not, I take it?"

“No, sir, I am not,” Commander Telles replied. “I am from the Takar system, as is Admiral Dumar.”

“Takar?” The minister looked puzzled. “I never heard of it.”

“I would think not,” Commander Telles said. “It is over nine hundred light years distant.”

“Nine hundred light years?” Minister Abrahms replied. “Now I know that you are joking. I’m actually quite surprised at you, Commander. You didn’t seem the type.” The minister began to stand. “Gentlemen, I believe you’ve wasted enough of my time...”

“Minister Abrahms,” Admiral Dumar began, “No one at this table has been anything but truthful with you. If you choose not to believe us, that is certainly your right. But perhaps you should hear us out, nonetheless.”

The minister looked at the admiral, then exchanged glances with Captain Scott and Commander Telles as well. “Very well,” he agreed, sitting back down.

“Through an unforeseen accident,” the admiral began, “Captain Scott and the Aurora ended up in our sector of space—an area we call the Pentaurus cluster—nearly one thousand light years away from Sol. They were damaged, and unable to return home. They received help from our people, inadvertently got involved in a rebellion of sorts, and by forming an alliance, they helped us gain our independence from a rather tyrannical dictator. Unfortunately, by the time the Aurora returned to Sol, the Jung had already invaded and seized control of Earth. Captain Scott, along with the help of Commander Telles and his men, managed to drive the Jung from his world. Unfortunately, the Earth suffered considerable damage and loss of life in the process.”

“An impressive, if somewhat difficult to believe, story, Admiral. However, I fail to understand what that has to do with Copora.”

“In the months that followed,” the admiral continued, “the Jung attempted to retake the Earth—more than once, I might add. Those attacks have left the Earth teetering on the edge of complete collapse. They cannot withstand another attack, hence, under my orders, the forces of the Alliance are attempting to clear a twenty light year sphere around Sol... A ‘safe’ zone, if you will. This will give the Earth at least a full solar year, perhaps longer, to recover.”

“You plan on eliminating every Jung ship, every surface base, and every soldier, within twenty light years of Sol?” the minister asked, just to be sure he was understanding the admiral correctly.

“That is correct.”

The minister laughed. “I hope you have plenty of ships, admiral, because the Jung surely do.”

“We have enough.”

“And how many do you believe are enough?” the minister taunted.

“Two ships of this size, and three more a tenth this size.”

“More like a twentieth,” Nathan mumbled.

Minister Abrahms scanned their faces again, unsure what to believe. “Assume for one moment that you speak the truth. What is it you wish from the people of Copora?”

“Join the Alliance,” Admiral Dumar stated plainly.

“We have no ships to offer you, Admiral. What few we had were destroyed long ago.”

“You have people. You have resources. Both are items the Earth sorely lacks at present.”

“Why not bring them from your world?” the minister wondered. “Takar, was it?”

"We have been," the admiral assured him. "But we do not yet have the necessary transportation infrastructure to move the amount of resources needed, at least not in a timely fashion."

"If this ship can travel between Earth and Sol in the blink of an eye, then surely it can travel one hundred times that distance in say, one hundred blinks of an eye."

"The jump drive technology, as amazing as it is, does have its limitations, Minister," Admiral Dumar admitted. "Which is why we seek alliances with worlds in closer proximity... Ones that share our dislike for the Jung."

"And how do you know that we *dislike* the Jung?" the minister challenged. "You never even asked."

"We have had covert operatives on your world for some time now," Nathan told the minister.

"I see." Minister Abrahms took a deep breath and sighed. "Gentlemen, as entertaining as this has all been, I have absolutely no evidence that any of this is anything but a fanciful web of lies."

"To what end, Minister?" Admiral Dumar wondered.

"That, I have yet to discern, Admiral. Still, my not having a motivation for your deception does not make your assertions true. The very fact that they are so wildly unbelievable is enough reason for me to dismiss them completely."

Nathan tapped the intercom built into the conference table. "Ensign Riley, Captain."

"Riley. Go ahead, sir," the ensign answered over the intercom.

"How quickly can you put us in orbit over Earth?"

"We're on the Sol side of Copora now, Captain. However, the next medical evac shuttle is due to return in twenty-four minutes."

"How long, Ensign?"

"Sorry, sir. Three minutes, tops."

"Tell the evac shuttle to hold on the surface until we return, and prepare to break orbit for and jump back to Earth. We'll be there in two minutes."

"Aye, sir," Ensign Riley acknowledged. *"We'll be ready."*

"Captain, please," the minister begged. "There is no need to carry this illusion any further."

"You wanted evidence, Minister," Nathan said. "I'm about to give it to you." Nathan stood. "Shall we?"

Two minutes later, Nathan entered the Aurora's bridge, followed by Admiral Dumar, Minister Abrahms, and Commander Telles.

"Captain on the bridge!" the guard at the entrance announced as Nathan passed.

"Ensign Riley?" Nathan inquired as he moved forward toward his command chair.

"Breaking orbit now," the navigator replied. "Jump to Earth is plotted and ready. Jump point in fifty seconds."

Minister Abrahms tried not to show his wonder at the sight of his world slipping away from the bottom of the main view screen. Kleiades, the gas giant around which Copora orbited, was sliding away to the left, its turquoise light fading as it disappeared from the view screen altogether.

"Comms, has that medical shuttle on the surface been notified?"

"Yes, sir," Naralena answered.

Nathan rotated in his chair to glance back aft, looking at Jessica as she stepped onto the bridge and took her station at tactical.

"Sorry for the delay, Captain," Jessica said. "I was doing some recruiting... For a field trip."

"Twenty seconds to jump point." Ensign Riley reported.

"What is this, 'jump drive'?" Minister Abrahms inquired. His tone suggested that, despite the captain's theatrics, we was not yet fully convinced of their sincerity.

"It is the reason we do not need more than a few ships to defeat the Jung," Admiral Dumar stated with confidence.

"What is about to happen?"

"There will be a bright flash of light, and then we will arrive in the Sol system," Nathan explained, "most likely, very close to Earth."

Ensign Riley exchanged glances with Ensign Chiles to his right, and smiled. "Ten seconds to jump point."

"Very well," Nathan acknowledged.

"How bright?" Minister Abrahms wondered, appearing a bit nervous.

"Three....." the navigator began to countdown.

"Do not worry, Minister," the admiral assured him.

"Two....."

"The view screen attenuates the flash."

"One....."

"To the naked eye, it would be blinding," Commander Telles added.

"Jumping."

Minister Abrahms watched, his mouth dropping open slightly, as pale blue light seemed to spill out across the forward sections of the Aurora's hull on the main view screen. The light quickly washed out in all directions until the entire hull was covered. The light grew quickly in intensity until it flashed a brilliant blue-white, illuminating the inside of the bridge for a split second. The entire event took only a second at the most.

Minister Abrahms' mouth was now fully agape, his eyes wide. He flinched, nearly turning to run, at the image of the Earth as it suddenly appeared before him on the view screen as the jump flash quickly subsided. "Oh, my God!"

"Jump complete," Ensign Riley reported. "Entering high Earth orbit."

"Very well," Nathan acknowledged. He turned aft again to face Minister Abrahms.

"This cannot be," the minister insisted. "This is surely some trickery... An illusion prepared to trick me into..."

"I can give you a pressure suit and put you out an airlock, so that you can see for yourself," Nathan offered, "if you'd prefer?"

"What is that?" the minister wondered, pointing at an object just coming into view on the main view screen directly ahead of them.

"Celestia, dead ahead, Captain," Mister Navashee announced.

"Helm, close to five hundred meters and hold position," Nathan ordered.

"Five hundred meters and hold, aye," Ensign Chiles answered.

"That's another ship?" the minister asked. "How far away is it?"

Nathan looked at Mister Navashee.

"Five kilometers, and closing," Mister Navashee reported.

"But it's so big," the minister exclaimed in disbelief. "Is it a Jung ship?"

"That is the Celestia, our sister ship," Nathan explained.

Moments later, the image of the Celestia filled the main view screen.

"It looks badly damaged," the minister commented.

"She had a slug fest with a Jung battle platform a few weeks ago. She should be good as new after a few months in dry dock."

"She fought a Jung battle platform, and survived?" The minister could not believe what he was hearing, or seeing.

"It was a team effort," Admiral Dumar added.

Nathan stood and made his way back toward the minister. "I trust that you now believe we are being truthful with you, Minister. Or do I need to call for that pressure suit?"

Minister Abrahms shook his head. "Could you not simply take what you want from us? Such is obviously within your capabilities..."

"We are not the Jung," Admiral Dumar explained. "We shall not force you or your people to do anything they do not *wish* to do. We deeply regret the Coporan lives that were lost due to our actions, but the Jung have left us with no other alternative. We must fight them. We all must fight them. Coporans included. The Jung must know that the people of the Sol sector, or any sector for that matter, will not be subjugated."

"And if we do not wish to join your alliance?" the minister asked. "Then what will become of us?"

"That, I cannot answer," Admiral Dumar admitted. "I can tell you that the Alliance shall leave you in peace, after we have treated your wounded and done what we can to help stabilize your world. However, I cannot promise you that the Jung shall not return. If they do, we would of course be compelled to fight them once again, if only to keep their forces a safe distance from Sol."

"If you would fight them anyway, then why should we bother to align ourselves with your alliance? That very act

alone might be enough to bring the Jung's full wrath down upon us."

"Indeed it might," Admiral Dumar admitted. "However, we offer you more than just defense. You wondered how the Earth managed to go from pre-orbital to interstellar—and then some, I might add—in only such a short time? The answer to that question is the Data Ark."

"The what?"

"A massive data storage system," Nathan explained, "containing the history, culture, religion, science, and technology of humanity, from the dawn of humanity up to the advent of the bio-digital plague. As the bio-digital plague began to ravage the Earth and the worlds of the Sol sector, the Ark was sealed off to protect it from infection. It was discovered two hundred years ago, in the mountains on Earth. That is how we have achieved so much in such a short time."

"And as a member of the Alliance, we would share that knowledge with you, as well as provide you with the protection your world needs to defend itself against the Jung, should they return."

Minister Abrahms scanned their faces again, looking for any telltale signs of deceit, but found none. "And you will not tell us how to run our world?"

"You will be free to govern your world as you see fit," Admiral Dumar assured him. "We only require that you fulfill your obligations under the terms of the Alliance."

Minister Abrahms looked at the deck in front of him, rubbing his eyes and face. "It is still difficult to believe," he said, "but I am convinced that you are being truthful with me. Therefore, I must be truthful with you."

Admiral Dumar and Nathan exchanged glances.

"I am not Minister Abrahms," the minister admitted. "I was sent in his stead, for fear that his life would be in danger should he attend the meeting himself."

Commander Telles almost smiled. "A logical precaution."

"I will, however, arrange for you to meet with the real Minister Abrahms, upon our return to Copora." The fake minister looked at them. "You will be returning me to Copora, will you not?"

Admiral Dumar smiled. "Indeed we will."

* * *

"I appreciate your coming to update me about the liberation of Copora in person," President Scott told his son.

"It's not a problem, sir," Nathan assured his father. "It's good for me to get out of the ship from time to time, especially to visit Earth. It serves to remind me what we're trying to defend."

Dayton Scott leaned back in his chair, contemplating his son's words. "I wouldn't think your homeworld would be that easy to forget."

"It isn't, really," Nathan admitted. "It's just that being cooped up in a ship, week after week, you forget what life is *supposed* to be like."

President Scott seemed surprised by his son's statement. "Life is *supposed* to be what you make it. Each person has to find their own 'normal'."

"That's not what I mean," Nathan said. "I'm not talking about the daily routines, friends and family, work... none of that. I'm talking about how human beings were meant to live. On a world, with gravity, air to breathe, sunlight on your face, surrounded by life in all its variety. On board, everything is manufactured, artificial. Your very life is

dependent on systems that simulate a hospitable environment for humans. All of it can cease to function at a moment's notice. On Earth, it's all just there, all the time. You can depend on it. The possibility that it can suddenly be taken away from you never even enters your mind."

"I'm not sure most people on Earth would agree with you," his father said. "At least not these days. Granted, the air is unlikely to suddenly vanish, but in many areas you still can't go outside without a respirator and protective clothing. Everything that we had come to depend on... The availability of food, water, shelter... The protection of our freedoms and rights. The comfort of knowing that we would not be preyed upon every time we stepped out of our homes. The fact that we even *had* homes."

"I don't think we're talking about the same things," Nathan insisted.

"Oh, but we are. Just on different scales. 'Security' is not about protection. It's about knowing that those things upon which you depend for your very existence will always be available to you. It's simply a matter of perspective. Yours is interstellar. Mine is international. For the people of Earth, it is local... Be it neighborhoods, cities, provinces, countries, or continents. When you come back down to Earth to remind yourself why you fight, you're simply trying to regain your original perspective, one that is more familiar and comforting. I suspect that will become less important to you as time goes on."

Nathan shook his head, a small laugh escaping. "How do you know all this?"

His father also laughed. "I'm an old man, Nathan. Much older, in fact, than my actual years reflect. My father once told me that life itself was the best education. But just living it wasn't enough. You had to keep your eyes and ears open,

and on occasion, take the time to reflect upon your experiences, both big and small, for every one of them has something to teach you."

Nathan thought for a moment, remembering his grandfather. "You and he were very different people."

"Yes, we were... in many ways," his father agreed. "But in many ways, we were alike."

"I miss him at times."

"As do I." President Scott placed his hands on the desk. "But enough of that. Tell me, what are your impressions of the Coporans? Will they choose to join the Alliance?"

"Possibly," Nathan said. "It's hard to get a read on them at the moment. They're very suspicious of us."

"Not surprising, considering we just invaded their world."

"We didn't invade their world," Nathan defended. "We eliminated the Jung forces that were occupying their world."

"You came from the skies, uninvited and unannounced, and attacked. You may have been targeting the Jung, but you killed Coporans as well. To them, you are invaders. You have to remember that appearances are just as important as truths, sometimes even more so."

"You speak of the Alliance in the third person. It is not 'you', it is 'we'. The people of Earth are part of the Alliance."

"You are quite correct, Nathan," his father admitted. "Again, it is appearances... perceptions. I have no control over the Alliance. Not as the President of the Terran Union, nor as a citizen of Earth. I can voice my opinion on behalf of our world, but if the other representatives of the member worlds do not agree with me, I do not have the power to override them. The survival of the Earth no longer rests in the hands of one of our own... Namely you. They rest in the hands of Admiral Dumar, a Takaran. One that quite likely answers to Prince Casimir."

Nathan seemed surprised. "You speak as if you suspect them of ulterior motives."

"I believe both Admiral Dumar and Prince Casimir to be good and honorable men, and I trust both of them to do everything within their power to protect the Earth, and all the member worlds of the Alliance. However, I have the benefit of my son's experiences with them. The people of Earth do not. Given the circumstances, they might have cause for suspicion. It is likely unjustified, but to them, they may seem otherwise."

"You speak like a politician," Nathan said, obvious distaste in his tone.

"You're surprised?" his father laughed. "I've been a politician my entire adult life, as was my father before me, and his father before him. You yourself are a politician of sorts. After all, war is just another form of politics."

Nathan sighed. "So, the people of Earth do not trust the Alliance?"

"There may be a few who raise questions," President Scott admitted. "However, they are of no concern. They mostly just voice their concerns whenever the Aurora leaves the system to fight elsewhere."

"We have to," Nathan defended. "You saw what happens to the Earth when the fight occurs in our own system."

"We all know that..."

"Besides, all of our current targets are a single jump from Sol. If the Jung were to show up while we're away, we could return in minutes."

"Again, you and I know that, but to the average person on the street, that ability is nothing short of a miracle. People have a hard time believing in miracles. Especially after all that has happened over the last year." President Scott waved his hand. "Do not worry, Nathan. The Karuzara

will soon return, and once again the people of Earth will have a symbol of power in orbit above them. Sometimes, all they need is the knowledge that there is someone up there, someone with guns, standing guard."

"You and Prince Casimir should spend some time together," Nathan said. "You are both 'big picture' kind of men."

"As are you," his father said. "You just try to deny it."

Nathan leaned back in his chair in much the same way as his father had a few minutes earlier. "So, how are things going with the Terran Union?"

"It will be easier once the missing comm-sats have been replaced," the president said. "It's hard to conduct joint video conferences when you keep losing signals."

"Can't you all just meet in one place?" Nathan wondered.

"Resources are still very limited, and the situation on the surface is still unstable over sixty percent of the Earth's inhabited areas. There are many days where I don't even have a shuttle available to me, let alone the guards to ensure my safety outside of this facility. It is the same for the other national leaders."

"How long until things get under control?" Nathan wondered.

"The first thousand security troops are due to arrive at Porto Santo in a few days. It should take a couple months to train them and get them deployed to the main hot spots around the world. But that is just the first step. It will take tens of thousands of them to restore order across the globe... Perhaps even hundreds of thousands. After all, they are not Ghatazhak."

"But they will be a unified force, under a unified global command," Nathan reminded him, "which is exactly what the Earth needs right now... Unity."

“Agreed,” his father replied. “And because of the Jung attacks, for the first time in human history, we might actually be able to attain it.”

CHAPTER THREE

Jessica stood in the middle of the Aurora's starboard boarding foyer, dressed in a nondescript, loose-fitting black outfit that covered her entire body. The hood of the outfit was hanging loosely down around her neck. She looked at the Corinairan technician standing at the control pedestal in the corner of the compartment, and flashed him an impatient expression.

"Scout Three is docking now, sir," the Corinairan answered in a thick accent.

In response to the sound of footsteps, Jessica turned to face the entrance from the main corridor. Sergeant Weatherly stepped through the hatch into the foyer, followed by Naralena. Both were dressed in similar fashion. Neither appeared calm and relaxed.

"You up for this?" Jessica asked them. "I can still go it alone and take my chances, you know. After all, that is what I was trained for."

"With your Jung, you wouldn't last a day," Naralena quipped.

Jessica smiled. "And you, Sergeant?"

"Signed up to see the world, and I got the galaxy," Sergeant Weatherly replied. "I'm good to go, sir."

"Scout Three has hard dock, Lieutenant Commander," the Corinairan technician announced. "They are cycling their airlock now."

"Last chance?" Jessica said to Naralena and the sergeant.

A moment later the airlock hissed and the inner doors slid apart, revealing the extended docking tunnel and the open hatch to Scout Three on the opposite end. Sergeant Ravi came walking down the docking tunnel toward them. "Ready to go, sir?" he asked as he entered the foyer.

"Ready as we'll ever be," Jessica answered.

"Great," Sergeant Ravi said. "The jump sub is attached to our topside aft maintenance airlock and ready to go. So, if you'll all follow me, we can get you on your way."

Sergeant Weatherly motioned for Naralena to lead the way, then for Jessica.

"Lieutenant Commander," Nathan called as he entered the compartment.

Jessica looked at Sergeant Weatherly. "I'll catch up to you." She turned and looked back at Nathan. "What's up, Skipper?"

"Just wanted to wish you good luck," Nathan said. "It's become kind of a habit, every time you embark on some crazy mission."

Jessica rolled her eyes. "Yeah, and I thought being assigned to the Aurora was going to be boring."

"Yeah, well, it's certainly not that."

They both stood there for several seconds, not saying anything.

"Wow, this isn't awkward," Jessica finally said.

"Right," Nathan replied. "Be safe, Lieutenant Commander."

"Be safe?" Jessica laughed. "Man, you suck at this." She grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled him toward her, giving him a kiss that, while not overly passionate, was more than friendly. After they separated, she noticed the smirk on the face of the Corinairan technician at the airlock control pedestal. "Something funny, Mister?" she snapped.

The technician snapped to attention, the smile disappearing from his face. "No, sir."

Jessica turned back to Nathan. "You be safe as well... Captain." She flashed a smile, then turned and headed down the boarding tunnel, disappearing into Scout Three's hatch without looking back.

Once inside the Scout ship's outer airlock, she moved to the open hatch on the other side. As Sergeant Ravi pulled the outer hatch closed, Jessica grabbed the bar over the inner hatch opening, lifted up her feet, and swung herself into the ladder tunnel on the other side of the hatch. The gravity in the Scout ship's main deck pulled her downward at a perpendicular angle to the airlock's gravity. She placed her feet on the ladder rungs that wrapped around the inside of the tunnel and began to climb down into the Scout ship.

She skipped the last few rungs and dropped to the main deck, then turned to face aft, finding her older brother standing next to the hatchway that led to the wardroom. "Permission to come aboard, Captain?"

"You always kiss your commanding officer goodbye?" Captain Nash wondered.

"You saw that?"

Robert pointed up the tunnel over her head.

"I was just messing with his head," Jessica insisted as Sergeant Ravi came down the ladder behind her.

"All buttoned up, sir," the sergeant reported.

"Very well," Captain Nash replied as he tapped his comm-set. "Skeech, disconnect and take us out. I'll be there shortly."

"*Aye, sir.*"

Captain Nash looked at Sergeant Ravi, who was standing by the forward hatch. "Don't you have someplace to be, Sergeant?"

"Uh, yes, sir," the sergeant replied, disappearing into the forward compartment and closing the hatch behind him.

Robert looked back to his baby sister. "I thought I saw something in his eyes when he spoke about you on that shuttle ride down to Porto Santo to surprise you." He looked at her sternly, "You're not sleeping with him, are you?"

"Of course not," she replied. "At least, not since he became my CO."

Robert looked at her again, with even greater disapproval.

"We had a one-night stand on Founders' Day," Jessica defended, "the day before I deployed. He didn't even know I was in the service."

"*You* knew."

"I didn't know we would end up on the same ship," she defended. "Hell, he wasn't supposed to be on the Aurora. His assignment got changed that night."

"Yeah, I wonder why?"

"Oh, come on," she insisted. "Look, nothing has happened since that night. Hell, that's the first time I've kissed him since I stepped on board, and like I said, I was just messing with him. We're just friends."

"Dangerous waters, little one."

Jessica snickered. "You're such an ass."

"You're such an ass... sir?"

Jessica made another face at her older brother. "Well, if you'll excuse me... sir. I have to get to my jump sub."

Robert sighed. "Hey," he called to her in his most authoritative tone, "be safe."

"Back at ya, Bobert," she replied as she turned and headed through the aft hatch into the wardroom.

Jessica made her way into the wardroom, around the center multipurpose table and into the hatch at the other

end of the compartment. She smiled at her brother, still standing in the forward hatchway, as she pulled the hatch closed behind her, then moved down the narrow corridor that ran along either side of the Scout ship's reactors. At the first intersection, she turned right and squeezed between two vertical trusses, moved a few meters toward the side, and then turned forward again.

"Lieutenant Commander," Lieutenant Scalotti greeted, offering a casual salute as Jessica approached the service airlock.

"Lieutenant," she replied. "I trust our ride is ready?"

"Yes, sir. They've been testing it for the last few days," the lieutenant explained. "It's quite a feat of engineering, especially considering how little time they had to get it ready."

"I try not to think about that part," Jessica admitted.

Jessica looked into the small airlock, finding Sergeant Weatherly and Naralena waiting for her in the cramped airlock.

"How do they do EVAs from here?" the sergeant wondered.

"No pack," Lieutenant Scalotti replied. "Just an umbilical."

"Did you check it out?" Jessica asked the sergeant.

"We were waiting for you, sir," the sergeant replied.

"Not much to look at, and it's pretty cramped," she told him. "Luckily, we won't be in there very long." She took a deep breath and glanced up the tunnel that led topside to the jump sub. "Well, I'm driving, so I'll sit up front," Jessica explained. "Naralena, you sit behind me, which puts you in the back, Sergeant. Since the hatch is over Naralena's seat, you'll have to get in first."

"You sure you know how to pilot that thing?" the sergeant wondered.

"It's pretty much automated," Jessica assured him. "All I have to do is push a few buttons to activate it, and boom, we're cruising underwater on Kohara."

"And they tested it already?" the sergeant asked.

"Of course they did," she replied. She looked back at Lieutenant Scalotti. "Right?"

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant assured them. "Last test jump was about four hours ago."

"You see?" she said as the sergeant started up the ladder. "Nothing to worry about."

"Good luck, sir," the lieutenant said as he stepped back from the airlock hatch. Jessica watched as the sergeant climbed up the ladder, opened the outer hatch, and then floated through the opening, disappearing into the sub. She turned to Naralena. "Give me a minute to get settled, then come on up and close the hatch behind you."

Jessica started up the ladder as Naralena nodded. She could feel the Scout ship's artificial gravity lessen in strength as she ascended. By the time she reached the outer airlock, she was floating freely. Directly above her was the center seat, upside down from her perspective, with the back of the sub's forward-most seat reclined back and lying on top of the center seat. She pulled her knees in to her chest, floating in a ball, and used her hands against the bulkheads to flip herself over so that her feet were pointing straight up toward the floor of the jump sub looming over her. She stopped her rotation, straightened her legs, and pushed herself through the hatch and down into the jump sub. Once inside, she slid forward along the reclined seat back until she reached the forward-most seat of the jump

sub's cockpit. "How are you doing back there, Sarge?" she asked, as she settled into position.

"You weren't kidding when you said it was cramped back here," the sergeant replied.

"Yeah, well, that space used to be full of air tanks and such. They had to pull them to make room for your dumb ass."

"This mission wasn't my idea, sir."

Jessica smiled as she pulled the lever on the side of her seat, causing the back to spring back upright. "I'm in!" she called out to her companions still inside the Scout ship, as she fastened her lap belt. She looked out the two, small forward portholes of the jump sub. Scout Three loomed over them, upside down and mostly to their right, as they were attached to her port maintenance airlock. She scanned the touch screen display in front of her, just below the window. The display was sealed in a water-tight container to protect its sensitive electronics from water when they flooded the sub for egress. Technicians from both Takara and Earth had worked together feverishly for the last three weeks to fit one of the Earth's mini-sub's with a jump drive. Then, with the addition of two more members to the mission, they had been forced to get even more creative in order to fit all three people into a cockpit that had originally been built to accommodate two. The results, of course, were rather cramped quarters.

Jessica could hear Naralena as she moved into the seat directly behind her.

"Closing the hatch," Naralena announced as she reached up and pulled the hatch down tight and spun the locks closed. "Hatch is secure," she added as she settled down into her seat and fastened her restraints.

Jessica paused for a moment, scanning the display as she recalled the power-up sequence that she had rehearsed in the simulator, and then began powering up the jump sub's systems.

"What kind of sub did you say this was?" the sergeant asked from the back of the cramped cockpit.

"DSWS," Jessica replied as she mounted her comm-set and ran a quick systems check. The console was quite simple, with nothing more than a touch screen that allowed the user to scroll through various systems status screens, and a few controls for the jump drive as well as the communications gear.

"A what?"

"Deep Sea Worker Sled," she explained. "It was used to take deep sea workers from ship to work site, then back again."

"I thought sleds didn't have pressurized cockpits?" the sergeant commented.

"They added all of this," Jessica said, gesturing at the walls and ceiling around them. "Actually, it used to seat four, fully suited divers. They kept the sub's maneuvering systems, batteries, and buoyancy control systems, and then gutted most everything else."

"What was left?" the sergeant wondered.

"There were a lot of tank racks," she replied. "I guess they changed tanks a lot while they were working. They used those spaces, as well as space where the last two seats were to install the mini-jump drive, energy banks, comm gear, and basic life support. The whole thing is controlled from the mini-computer built into this console here."

"How 'basic'?" the sergeant wondered.

"A couple hours at best," she answered. "Oh, and of course the mandatory jump drive self-destruct package as well."

"Of course," the sergeant replied uneasily. "Is this thing safe?"

"You heard the lieutenant," Jessica said as she tapped her comm-set. "Scout Three, Jump Sub One. We're in and secure. All systems are green here."

"Jump Sub One, Scout Three," Ensign Wells replied over the comms. *"We'll be at the first jump point in one minute. Just sit back and enjoy the ride."*

"Enjoy the ride," Jessica said under her breath. "We're in a converted mini-sub... In space. I'll enjoy the ride after it's over."

"I thought you said this thing was safe?" Sergeant Weatherly said.

"If everything works the way it's supposed to, *and* we don't hit anything while we're jumping, then yeah, this bucket *is* safe."

"I don't know," the sergeant protested. "I once jumped into the ocean from about fifteen meters up... From a shuttle. That water was not soft."

"Relax, there's nothing to worry about," Jessica assured him. "As I understand it, it will be like we were dropped, nose first, from about ten meters above the water. It won't be fun, but the sub will survive, and so will we."

"And you know how to operate the jump drive?" the sergeant asked.

"Look, Sarge, if you don't want to go..."

"No offense, sir, but the jump drive is a complex device, isn't it? It needs all kinds of precise calculations and stuff. And don't you have to be on the correct course and speed before you..."

“Not this one. It’s designed to make a fixed-distance jump. Scout Three will put us on the correct trajectory and speed,” Jessica explained, “I just activate the system, and at the precise moment, it jumps us. When we come out of the jump, we’ll already be thirty meters under, so no one will see our jump flash. Then all I have to do is level her off and steer us to shore as we climb up to more shallow depths.”

“And how do we get back?” the sergeant asked.

“Just take her down, steer it back upward for a moment, and activate the jump sequencer again. It will put us back out in space, about a light month outside the Tau Ceti system, where Scout Three will be keeping an eye out for us.”

“Jump Sub One, Scout Three. Prepare for jump series, in three...” Ensign Wells called over Jessica’s comm-set, “...two...”

“Jumping,” Jessica called out. “Cover up!” she added as she closed her eyes and covered them with both hands.

The blue-white flash of Scout Three’s jump field lit up the inside of the jump sub, fading a moment later.

“Jump complete,” Ensign Wells reported.

“We’re good,” Jessica announced as she removed her hands from her eyes and looked out the forward window. “How are we looking up there?” she called back over the comms.

“Came out on target,” Ensign Wells replied over the comms. *“Give us a few minutes to get you on the correct speed and trajectory.”*

“Take your time.”

The three of them sat in silence, all squeezed into a space originally meant for only two, surrounded by a shell that was designed to keep from collapsing against outside pressure trying to get in, rather than the reverse. It was a

shell that provided precious little protection against cosmic radiation, if any at all.

"Does this seem like a really crazy idea to anyone else, or is it just me?" Naralena wondered, breaking the silence.

"No, it's not just you," Jessica said, laughing. "This is beyond crazy. Way beyond."

"Jump Sub One, Scout Three," Ensign Wells called over the comms. *"We are on the designated intercept trajectory with Kohara, thirty-five KPH closure rate. Jump point in one minute. Stand by for release."*

"Jump Sub One, ready for release," Jessica replied as she slipped her shoulder straps on as well. "Get secured," she instructed.

"You know, Jess," Captain Nash called over the comms, *"if anyone had told me that someday I'd be dropping my little sister into an inland sea a couple light years away, I would have thought they were crazy."*

"Well, you know how much I've always loved water sports," Jessica replied.

"Just don't drown, alright? I don't know how the hell I'd explain this to Mom and Dad."

"Dying isn't on my agenda, Bobert," Jessica replied. "Besides, it's damned hard to kill a Nash, remember?"

"Jump Sub One, release in three.....two.....one.....release."

Jessica pressed the release button attached to the ceiling above the front windshield. A loud grinding sound of a motor reverberated through the hull of the jump sub as the docking clamps gently pulled away from their docking collar, setting them free. She watched out the forward porthole as maneuvering jets fired along the topside of Scout Three, sending them drifting up and away from the jump sub.

"We're free," Jessica reported, both over her comm-set and to her two companions behind her. She glanced at the console in front of her. "Positive separation rate. Three meters and increasing. She leaned forward and peered up through the porthole at the Scout ship as it fired its deceleration thrusters and quickly fell back away and out of her sight."

"Fifty meters separation and increasing," Ensign Wells reported. *"You're clear to jump, sir."*

"Roger that," Jessica replied. "Jump point in ten seconds." Jessica armed the jump drive as the countdown continued. "Hold on, people. We're about to get wet."

"Good luck, Jess," Robert called over the comms.

"See ya, soon," she replied as she tightened her shoulder restraints. She glanced down at the console. "Cover up! Jumping in three.....two.....one..."

Jessica closed her eyes and covered her face with both hands again, tightening her muscles to prepare for the sudden jolt they would feel when they came out of the jump, thirty meters below the surface of Lake Tanner on the planet Kohara.

"...Jumping!"

The blue-white jump flash washed over the cockpit of the jump sub, lighting up the inside of Jessica's eyelids, despite their being closed and covered. She remained tense, expecting the sudden jolt, but it didn't come. Something was wrong.

Jessica's hands dropped from her face and her eyes opened, immediately looking through the jump sub's two forward windows. It was dark outside the sub. Something else was different. The gravity... "What the...?" A surge of adrenaline hit her as the situation became apparent.

Reflections of light from one of Kohara's three moons glistened off the ripples in the water rushing under them, growing closer as they fell toward the water. "Brace yourselves!" she yelled.

The jump sub slammed into the water, not nose first as planned, but rather belly first. Jessica felt herself being crushed downward into her seat, a sharp twinge of pain radiating through her back. At the same moment, she was thrown forward against her restraints, the belts digging into her shoulders and eliciting further pain. Her head jerked forward, feeling like it was going to separate from her neck, as the force of the impact caused the sub to decelerate considerably.

And then it stopped. Jessica glanced out the forward windows again. They were floating. Not on the water, but through the air, but only for a moment. They immediately began to fall once more, slamming back into the surface of the lake only seconds later.

Again, pain shot in all directions... Through her back, shoulders, and neck. She tried to cry out in pain, but nothing came out. As they bounced upward again, she could see lights along the shoreline. The lights were rapidly moving toward them... She glanced at navigation display. They were headed right for the shore, and they were traveling far faster than they had planned.

They slammed into the water a third time, bouncing upward yet again. *We're skipping along the surface!* Jessica realized. Her mind raced as the sub reached the top of its airborne arc. *We're headed for shore... And fast!* She glanced at her display, looking for a way out. As they began to fall toward the water again, her fingers danced across the touch screen display, calling up the docking thrusters control page. She manually fired the nose attitude thrusters

that had been installed to aid in rendezvous and docking with the Scout ship. The nose of the jump sub was pushed downward by the tiny jet of thrusters spewing out of the topside of the jump sub's nose.

This time, instead of slamming belly first against the water and bouncing upward, the nose of the jump sub pierced the glistening water and slid under the surface, diving downward toward the bottom at high speed. Jessica again was thrown forward against her restraints as she flailed her hands about, trying to grab onto the sub's maneuvering controls. Alarms filled the cockpit, and the surface proximity warnings began to blare. She finally managed to grab hold of the diving planes control, but it was too late.

The jump sub slammed into the bottom of the lake, driving deep into the soft mud. The sound of the impact was deafening; twisted metal and alarms, and then the sound of gushing water. Jessica felt wetness at her feet, then the feeling of cold water hitting her back from above. She was still leaning forward, hanging from her shoulder restraints.

"Mask up!" she ordered as she reached for her face mask and pulled it down over her head. She hit the activation switch, and the mask pressurized and sealed to her face. "Sound off!"

"I'm good!" Naralena cried out of the mask's underwater comm-system. Terror was evident in her voice.

"Sarge?" Jessica queried. The water was already at her waist and rising fast, but the sub was resting at a considerable nose down angle, which put her in the deep end. "Sarge!" Jessica reached down to her side and pulled the release handle along the right side of her seat, disconnecting the dive pack that she was strapped to from her seat back. She fell forward slightly, landing with her left

side against the display console. She twisted around as Naralena also released her dive pack from her seat, fell forward, and landed against the back of Jessica's seat. Behind her, Sergeant Weatherly was not moving, and he didn't have his mask on.

Jessica quickly scanned the inside of the cockpit. Everything was out of place, giving the entire cockpit a slightly twisted appearance. Water was spewing forcefully from several places along the seam between the top of the sub's hull and the walls and ceiling that the engineers had added. "Avakian! Get Weatherly's mask on him!" she barked as the rising water reached her chest.

"Sergeant!" Naralena cried out as she reached back over her seat and grabbed the sergeant's face mask from the wall next to his head. She shook his shoulder with her left hand.

The sergeant began to move his head, opening his eyes slightly, dazed by the impact. Naralena looked down, and saw a metal brace that had come loose at impact. The sergeant was bleeding badly where the brace had punctured his abdomen. "Oh, my God!" she exclaimed as she pulled his mask down over his head and activated it. The sergeant's mask inflated, sealing to his face. She shook him again. "Sergeant!" She looked down again, this time noticing that the brace had also pushed his right leg over, pulling his hip out of its socket. "He's injured, Jess! Badly!" she turned to face Jessica, whose face was about to be covered by the rising water.

Jessica could see Naralena as the water rose along her face mask.

"I don't think we're going to be able to get him out!" Naralena continued.

Sergeant Weatherly opened his eyes and began to cry out in pain inside his mask. The water was already covering his injured leg and was climbing rapidly.

"Is his mask on?" Jessica asked.

"Yes! Yes!" Naralena answered. "He's awake, too!"

"Get ready to open the hatch!" Jessica ordered.

"But the sergeant..."

"I can't do anything until you're out of my way!" Jessica barked. "So get ready to open the hatch as soon as the water reaches the top!"

"Of fuck! It hurts!" Sergeant Weatherly cried out.

"Sergeant! Shut up and listen!" Jessica barked over the comms. "We're flooding, but we're all masked up, including you, so we're good! You got that?"

"Yes, sir!" the sergeant replied.

"What happened?" Naralena asked as she stood up to get her hand on the hatch controls.

"We came in nearly parallel to the surface," Jessica explained. Her end of the cockpit was now completely underwater, and dark, requiring her to fumble around to find the lever on the left side of her seat. "And way too damned fast! We were skipping off the surface and headed for shore."

"How the hell did that happen?" The sergeant wondered as he struggled to keep the pain from overpowering his senses.

"Somebody fucked up, that's how!"

"Oh, God," Naralena exclaimed as the water climbed up over the sergeant's face. She was now standing on her seat, her head and shoulders in the hatchway.

"Relax, Avakian," Jessica urged. "Nothing's changed. We exit the sub just like we planned. Then we get the sergeant out. Understood?"

"Aye, sir," Naralena replied, her voice trembling. The water was at her neck and climbing. "Oh, God, Oh, God."

"Enough with the 'Oh, Gods', already!" Jessica ordered.

"Sorry, sir," Naralena replied as the water climbed up over her head. She bent her head backward to see the underside of the hatch. The water was bubbling over her face as it reached the bottom of the hatch, finally stopping with a small air pocket splashing along the hatch's underside. "We're full," she announced as she released the hatch's locks. She pushed upward on the hatch, releasing the air pocket into the lake, allowing it to make its way toward the surface. She quickly moved upward through the hatch and then turned to the side, still holding onto the rim so that she could turn around and look back inside. The inside of the sub's cockpit was dimly lit by the waterproof emergency lighting, and she could see Jessica's seat lay back so that Jessica could slide aft toward the sergeant.

Jessica moved over Naralena's seat and pulled the lever, releasing the seat back and pulling it forward to give her room. She squeezed up over the seat back so that she could reach the sergeant. "How are you doing, Sarge?" she asked over the underwater comms.

"I've had better days, sir," the sergeant replied, his voice trembling as he fought back the pain. Jessica reached into the utility pocket of her suit and pulled out her small dive light, shining it on the twisted frame that had dislocated the sergeant's right hip and then impaled his abdomen.

"How bad is it, sir?" the sergeant asked.

"Good news is you're not bleeding that bad," Jessica replied, trying to sound hopeful. "The bad news is that the frame broke free and is impaled in your right side." She looked at the sergeant, staring at his eyes through their respective face masks. "There's not enough room to slide

you off that thing," she told him. "Even if there was, you'd probably bleed out before we got to the surface."

"How deep are we?" the sergeant wondered, his voice still trembling.

"I don't know. Twenty or thirty meters, maybe. We're close to shore, so it can't be that deep. The only way we're going to get you out alive is if we can find something to cut you out."

"Fuck," the sergeant replied, solemnly. He looked at her eyes again. "Where the hell are you going to find something to cut me out with, sir?"

"Hey, we're in the middle of civilization. We'll find something."

"I'm underwater, sir," the sergeant reminded her.

"You've got at least two hours of air in your bottle, sergeant," Jessica said. "That's plenty of time."

Sergeant Weatherly looked at her like she was crazy.

"Come on, Sarge. There's got to be a dock nearby. Some kind of boat repair shop or something."

"Yeah," the sergeant replied, trying to convince himself she was right. "Or something."

"I'll go topside and take a quick look around." Jessica turned to head up, but the sergeant grabbed her wrist.

"You're coming back, right?"

Jessica turned back to look at him. "Damn right, I am." She smiled at him. "Besides, I'll leave Naralena behind to keep you company."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant replied, obviously relieved.

Jessica turned and ascended through the overhead hatch out into the lake above, floating up past Naralena. She flipped back around and opened a compartment on the top of the sub, just aft of the hatch. She pulled out a pair of swim fins and quickly placed them on her feet. She then

turned to face Naralena. "I'm going up to take a look around and assess the situation," she told her over the underwater comms. "Keep him company."

"Yes, sir," Naralena replied over the underwater comms.

Jessica looked upward. The water around them was pitch black, filled with the contents of the lake bed that had been stirred up by their impact. Without any frame of reference, and no view of the surface, she had no way of knowing her depth. However, she did know that the average depth of the lake within one kilometer of the shore was about thirty meters, and she was quite sure they were no more than two kilometers out, if even one.

Jessica pushed off against the top of the jump sub and began to slowly rise to the surface. The weight of the breathing apparatus on her back was enough to compensate for her body's natural buoyancy, and she drifted slowly, and motionlessly to the surface. Less than a minute later, she was through the cloud of dirty water that surrounded her impact site. She could see the faint shimmering of the surface above her as she continued to rise. She glanced back downward, noting that the cloud of dirt that surrounded their impact site appeared to be unmoving. With luck, there would not be any currents at the surface, either, and she would be able to locate the sub again without having to use the remote device in her thigh pocket.

Jessica began to push her arms outward and upward to slow her ascent as she approached the surface. Her head touched the surface of the water, rising slowly into the atmosphere of Kohara. The waterline slid down her face mask, revealing the glistening surface of the lake. The shore was nowhere in sight. Jessica used her hands under the water to slowly rotate herself around, taking great care not

to make any sudden movements that might alert onlookers to her location. As she rotated, the distant shoreline came into view. The land stretched up and away from the edge of the lake. It was dotted with the lights of buildings. Businesses, residences, marinas... All the elements of civilization one would expect to find around such a body of water.

As she continued to rotate, the shoreline rapidly grew closer. She had come up with her back to the nearest point of land, and now she was facing that land directly. A marina, along with a long pier, was directly ahead of her, not quite a kilometer away. She could see activity. Men scurrying about in haste... And a boat. A boat was pulling away from the pier.

Something else caught her eye. Lights, high in the sky, coming toward the lake from the other side of the city. At least two separate sets of them, both flying relatively low. She watched them, and the boat for a moment. The lights were not gaining in altitude, and the boat now appeared somewhat motionless except for one thing... It was getting bigger. *They're headed this way*, she realized.

Jessica used her hands again to push herself downward, submerging her head beneath the surface once again, taking great pains not to make any abnormal ripples on the surface that someone on the approaching boat might notice. A few more pumps with her hands and she was able to descend enough to flip over and swim downward toward the bottom.

Jessica's mind raced as she descended, analyzing her options, none of which she liked. She pulled the remote out of her pocket and turned it on. She had precious little time, and she did not want to waste it groping along the bottom looking for the sub in the murky water. She wanted to call

and warn Naralena, tell her to get ready to leave, but she knew that the underwater comms had an extremely short range.

Soon, she was back in the murky water. She moved the remote in front of her face as she continued swimming downward through the muddy water. She was on course for the sub. However, there was something else. The sub was transmitting a message, but she had no way of knowing what the message was, as the remote was not a communications device. It was only designed to perform two functions, one of which was to lead her back to the ship.

Jessica reached the sub, nearly running into it as the muddy water suddenly parted and revealed the ship directly in front of her and approaching rapidly. She flipped over, her feet moving in under her. "Avakian! Exit, now!" she ordered over the underwater comms.

Naralena popped up through the sub's overhead hatch, her eyes wide. "What's going..."

"Put your fins on and grab your gear bag," Jessica ordered. "We're leaving."

Naralena looked panicked. "How are we..."

"Now!" Jessica barked, cutting her off again.

Naralena quickly moved upward, clearing the hatch and moving aft. Jessica stuck her feet down into the jump sub hatch and descended into its cockpit, facing aft. As she moved into the cockpit, she could see the sergeant's face clearly through his face mask. He was terrified.

"What's the situation, sir?" the sergeant asked.

Jessica could tell he was fighting hard to control the fear in his tone. The man was in pain, and he had to know by the tone of her voice over the underwater comms that something was wrong. "What's your first name, Sergeant?"

"Fuck," Sergeant Weatherly replied, her question confirming what he already feared. "Don't blow smoke up my ass, sir."

"I asked you your first name, Marine," she stated sternly.

"Jerome," he answered. "My friends call me Jerry."

"I'm not going to lie to you Jerry; the situation sucks. There's at least one boat headed our way, and probably more to come. There are two airships on their way as well. Shuttles, or something. I'm not sure."

"The Jung?"

"Maybe. Not sure about the boats, but the shuttles are a pretty good bet."

Sergeant Weatherly was fighting to stay in control of his emotions as he spoke. "Options, sir?"

"Call me Jess, Jerry."

The sergeant gave her a half-hearted smile. "Options?"

Jessica found it hard to form the word. "None," she said in a tone barely above a whisper. She felt herself overcome with sorrow, and had to fight it back to carry on. "You know what I have to do, Jerry."

Sergeant Weatherly's face cringed, his eyes squeezing closed forcefully as he fought back the tears. "I know," he replied. From behind his dive mask, he looked in her eyes. The interior emergency lighting was minimal, and he could barely make out the features of her face. "What the fuck happened, Jess?"

"Somebody screwed us, Jerry."

"You mean..."

Jessica showed him the remote. "The sub is transmitting its location to the Jung. Someone sabotaged this ship in order to get the jump drive to the Jung."

"Fuck!" the sergeant exclaimed, finally losing control. "Fuck!"

“Sergeant!” Jessica yelled over the underwater comms. “I know! I know! This fucking sucks! But it is what it is!”

“Fuck!”

“Do you understand?”

The sergeant squinted his eyes together again, his face cringed in an expression of anger and fear. “Yes, sir,” he replied softly, his eyes opening again and looking around in a vain attempt at acceptance. He looked at Jessica again, peering through both their face masks to look in her eyes as he struggled to fight back the tears. “You’re gonna find him, Jess. You’re gonna find him, and you’re gonna kill him.” The sergeant was not asking a question.

“You bet your ass, Jerry,” Jessica promised, fighting back her own tears as well. “I’ll make the bastard suffer,” she added, her hand reaching out to touch the side of his head. “I promise.”

“Give me the remote,” the sergeant said. “I’ll do it myself.”

Jessica felt herself about to lose control. “I can’t do that, Jerry. If you might pass out, or something...” She looked at him. “I have to be sure.”

“If I pass out, it will just blow up when they try to open the hatch, right?”

“What if the message included the disable code?” she explained, tears streaming down her cheeks as she sniffled. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Jerry, but I can’t take the chance. It’s my responsibility.”

Sergeant Weatherly’s eyes squeezed together again for a moment, then a look of resolve came over his face as he again looked her in the eyes. “You’d better go, sir.”

Jessica looked down for a moment, unable to look the sergeant in the eye. Finally, she looked at him again, placing

her hands on either side of his head. "You're a hell of a fucking marine, Jerry."

Sergeant Weatherly grabbed her wrist. "Good luck, Jess."

Without another word, Jessica let go of the sergeant and rose up and out of the sub. Once clear, she spun around, closed the hatch, and locked it, sealing the sergeant inside. She moved aft, grabbed her gear bag, and secured it to her chest before closing the door to the gear compartment. She turned and looked at Naralena. Behind her dive mask, she too had tears streaming down her face, having heard the entire exchange over the underwater comms.

"Jess, isn't there anything..."

"Eyes on me," Jessica ordered calmly, pointing at her face mask as she ignored Naralena's plea. "We stay along the bottom and swim parallel to shore until we're down to about an hour of air, then we head in and hope we find a safe place to exit the water without being noticed. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Naralena acknowledged, her eyes locked on Jessica's.

"I know this sucks, Avakian," Jessica admitted, "but you know the stakes."

"Yes, sir."

"Keep up, and don't lose sight of me, understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Without another word, Jessica pulled out her remote, checked her bearing, and pivoted toward the shore. She then turned ninety degrees to her right, and began swimming away from the jump sub.

Naralena touched the side of the sub and whispered. "Goodbye, Jerome."

Jessica swam at a steady pace, knowing that they might have to swim for quite some time before they found a spot

to covertly exit the lake. She glanced behind her every so often to make sure that Naralena was keeping up. It took them less than a minute to clear the murky water that surrounded their impact sight, and within a few more minutes, they were nearing a safe range from the jump sub. A hundred names ran through her mind as she swam. Someone had gone to great lengths to deliver a working jump drive to the Jung, and she was determined to find out who. She was determined to keep her promise to Sergeant Jerome Weatherly.

Still looking straight ahead, and still swimming at a steady pace, Jessica punched in the code on the remote, and then pushed the destruct button. A confirmation signal flashed, and the track back to the jump sub disappeared from her screen. A second later, they heard a muffled explosion and felt a strong surge of water from behind them.

Jessica did not look back. She just kept swimming... And kept running names through her head.

* * *

Vladimir stood beside the Aurora's tactical station, staring at the main view screen that wrapped around the front half of the Aurora's bridge. The image of the Karuzara asteroid filled the screen, with the Earth stretching across the bottom edge of the screen from port to starboard.

"Captain on the bridge!" the guard at the entrance announced as Nathan came out of his ready room and headed forward.

"What are you doing up here?" Nathan asked as he walked to the middle of the bridge and stepped up next to Vladimir.

Vladimir turned his attention away from the Aurora's main view screen for a brief moment, turning toward Nathan. "I have never seen the Karuzara asteroid," he replied. He pointed at the main view screen. "Not like this." He noticed something moving across the face of the massive asteroid base. "Is that the Celestia?"

"She's going in to make dry dock."

Vladimir looked at Nathan again, a look of mild surprise on his face. "They finished it already?"

"Blew out the walls between the caverns on the way out, then sealed it up and installed the doors on the way back," Nathan explained. "They still have a lot of work to do to finish it, but it will serve its purpose well enough for now."

"Where did they get the doors?" Vladimir wondered.

"From what was left of the damaged doors on the main tunnels. Needless to say, the main cavern will no longer be pressurized."

"Just as well," Vladimir said. "It was a waste of resources to pressurize an area that large."

"Yes, well, in the end, the decision was due to resources, or lack thereof," Nathan told him. "Better a dry dock for one ship, than none. Are your people ready to receive the Celestia's cores?"

"We will be by the time they are pulled," Vladimir promised.

"How long will it take to get them installed?"

"With both crews working around the clock, we should be able to have them online within the week."

"How about five days," Nathan replied. "I'd prefer to have full power again, before we hit Pylius."

Vladimir looked at Nathan again. "You do not care how little sleep I get, do you?"

"Not really," Nathan replied with a smile.

"I suspected as much." Vladimir looked at the screen again, just as the Celestia disappeared beneath the overhang that masked the entrance from the trench along the lower half of the Karuzara base into the main entrance tunnel. "How long until she is in port?"

"They should be hard docked, pressurized, and powered down in a few hours," Nathan replied. "We'll be going in just as soon as she's clear of the main cavern... say, about an hour from now."

"Then we have time to eat." Vladimir suggested.

"You don't want to wait for Cameron?"

Vladimir chuckled. "She will only criticize our food and try to get us to eat vegetables instead."

* * *

Commander Telles gazed out the open side of the Kalibri airship as it flew over the compound. Below him were rows upon rows of men, one thousand of them, awaiting his inspection. His first impression was that the new Earth Security Force volunteers lacked discipline and self-control. More than half of them were looking at the airship as it descended, instead of straight ahead, as they had no doubt been instructed by the Ghatazhak instructors who paced the perimeter of the formation, barking orders.

Commander Telles and his trusted friend, Master Sergeant Jahal, stepped out of the airship just as it touched down onto the tarmac. The airship only sat on the surface for a few seconds, just long enough for its two passengers to get clear of the ducted-rotor wash, before lifting off again.

The commander could feel a thousand pairs of eyes on him as he approached the formation. Unlike the Ghatazhak, these men came in varying sizes, and diverse ethnic and

cultural backgrounds. They had come from all of the surviving nations of Earth, and to them they would all return, once their training at Porto Santo was completed.

Commander Telles walked along the front row, scanning the faces of the volunteers of Earth. The idea that he could turn these men into anything remotely resembling a true Ghatazhak soldier was laughable. He did, however, believe that they could become a more effective security force than what most nations currently had in place.

"This planet does have an oddly diverse mixture of humans," Master Sergeant Jahal commented to his commander as they walked the line.

"As do most worlds we have visited," the commander replied. He turned away from the assembled men and moved further back, finally taking a position a few meters away and directly in front of the assembled men. He turned to face them again, pausing a moment before speaking. "I am Commander Telles of the Ghatazhak. Each of you has volunteered to help restore order to your respective nations. For that, you should be proud. Take a look at the men standing beside you. These are the only people you will truly care about from this point forward. Care about them first. Put their safety before yours, and together, you shall accomplish whatever tasks your leaders assign you."

Commander Telles paused, thinking back to his first days as a Ghatazhak. He had been but a teenager, with barely a whisker on his face, when he had stood in such a formation for the first time. He remembered feeling scared. He remembered doubting himself, and his ability to survive the training he was about to embark upon. He was afraid of bringing shame to his parents, and to the family name. Most of all, he had felt the pressure that had been placed upon his young shoulders, for his successes would bring his family

out of the ranks of commoners. They would never be of truly noble lineage, at least not by traditional Takaran standards, but they would be respected nonetheless. For their son would be Ghatazhak, or he would be dead.

The commander turned to his right and began to slowly pace along parallel to the line of volunteers as he spoke. "Contrary to popular belief, the Ghatazhak are not mindless killing machines. We do not enjoy killing others. We kill to accomplish an end, whatever that end may be. It is not ours to decide what those ends are. However, it is ours to decide how best to achieve them. *That*, above all else, is what it means to be a Ghatazhak soldier. You shall be taught how to fight. You shall be taught how to shoot. You shall be taught how to follow orders, and you shall be taught how to work as a team. Above all else, you shall be taught how to think... and in ways you never considered. When you choose to end a life, you shall do so with reason and due consideration, knowing full well the consequences of that act... and you shall make those judgments in the blink of an eye. Any creature, big or small, can be taught how to kill. Killing is the easy part, for life is fragile... possibly the most fragile thing known. Killing with a reason is harder. Harder still, is accepting that you killed for a reason, and living with the knowledge that you have killed... again, and again, and again."

The commander turned around and continued to pace back in the other direction. "You are about to begin the most difficult training ever conceived. Because of this, you *should* be afraid. If you are not, then you are a fool, and you will discover quite soon that the Ghatazhak do not suffer fools very well. Embrace your fear, use it to motivate you. Learn to conquer it, and you will find that you have the strength of ten men, and the lethality of a hundred."

Commander Telles stopped in the center once more. "Your training will last ten weeks. You will end each day in a state of complete exhaustion, both physically and mentally. You will suffer more than you can possibly imagine. Commit yourselves completely, and you shall graduate. You shall not be Ghatazhak. However, you will be the second most deadly fighting force on Earth."

Commander Telles paused, looking over the faces of the men before him, their eyes all pointed straight ahead, just as they should be. "The fact that you have volunteered to even attempt this training is enough to gain my respect. From this point forward, I only require three things from you. First, you always give one hundred percent. Second, you always follow orders. Fail at either one of those, and you will be dropped from this program. And finally, if at any time, you feel that you are not capable of continuing to do the first two items, then be here at any sunrise to catch the outbound shuttle. Do not risk the lives of the men around you because you are too embarrassed to quit."

Commander Telles looked both right and left down the front row of faces. "That is all." He turned and walked toward the master sergeant, who turned and walked beside his commander as he passed.

"I'm betting we need more than one shuttle tomorrow morning," Master Sergeant Jahal commented as they walked.

"We shall see."

* * *

Jessica's eyes darted left and right as her head slowly pierced the surface of the water. Directly in front of her, perhaps a kilometer distant, was the shoreline. She could

make out a few homes back from the water, and a few more further up the slope, but they were few and far between. As she had hoped, this part of the lake's shoreline was only sparsely populated.

She turned her head to look back over her left shoulder. She could barely make out the location where they had originally gone down, and only because there were at least a dozen boats of varying sizes trolling the area, including one larger vessel. Shuttles circled over the site, their spotlights illuminating the water below as they searched for signs of debris.

As she had calculated, the relatively short period of time that passed between their arrival and the detonation had led the locals to believe that if the craft that crashed into their lake had been crewed, the crew undoubtedly died when their ship exploded. It would take them several days, at the least, to find cause to suspect otherwise. By then, she hoped to be long gone.

A long look to the right revealed more and more lights along the shore and the subsequent hills, indicating that the population grew more dense further down the shoreline. She looked at the interface panel attached to her left wrist. They had been swimming for more than an hour, and at their current rate of consumption, little more than forty minutes of breathable air could be produced by their compact dive systems. Furthermore, her legs were aching from the pace they had been forced to maintain to get as much distance between them and the search parties before they ran out of air, and if she felt like she was nearing her limits, Naralena had to be as well. This location would have to suffice.

Jessica descended again, slipping back below the surface and down a few meters. She looked at Naralena, who was waiting for her five meters down. "I think we can slip ashore

here,” she told her over the underwater comms. “There are only a few houses scattered along the shore, and it’s still about a click away. We’ll move in closer and take another look to find our exit point.”

Naralena nodded her understanding without saying a word. In fact, the only words she had spoken since Jessica had detonated the jump sub with Sergeant Weatherly trapped inside had been either ‘yes, sir’ or ‘understood.’

Jessica expected that Naralena would be angry at her. She knew that Naralena could not dismiss the loss of a crewmate out of necessity in the same manner as she could. Naralena did not have the training. She hoped that the Volonese linguist was just dealing with it the best way she knew how. Eventually, she would speak of the incident, perhaps hurling accusations of callousness at her. That would be expected, and Jessica knew she could handle that. What she couldn’t tell Naralena was that she mourned the loss of the sergeant just as much... perhaps even more. The difference was, she couldn’t allow herself the luxury of getting all worked up over it. She had a mission to perform. She would mourn the loss of the good sergeant in her own way, once they returned to the Aurora.

They moved along the lake bed, swimming another twenty minutes. Another peek at the surface from about three hundred meters away had revealed a pier protruding from the shore, with a half dozen small boats tied alongside. After taking a bearing, they continued along the bottom until they reached the end of the pier.

Jessica ceased her rhythmic kicks as she passed under the end of the pier. “End of the road,” she told Naralena over the underwater comms. “We ditch the gear here and tie it to the bottom of the pilings.”

Naralena did not respond, only began to remove her swim fins.

Jessica did the same, looping them over her right arm. She released the buckle on her waist belt and then slipped the straps off her shoulders, swinging the small, compact, rebreather unit forward. After stringing the belt through the swim fin straps, she secured the entire unit to the bottom of one of the pilings. The mask still on her face, and still breathing from the rebreather, she turned to look at Naralena, who was securing her gear to the next piling. "You ready?"

"Yes, sir," Naralena responded.

"Remember, slow and quiet." Jessica took one last breath and then removed her mask. After closing the valve on the rebreather, she slowly ascended along the piling toward the surface.

Jessica's face broke the surface of the water with practiced precision, making not a ripple in the water. They were under the pier, just a few meters inland from its far end. After glancing about, she tapped Naralena, who was still submerged, on the top of her head, signaling her to surface as well. She leaned out slightly, looking overhead along the pier, both listening and looking for any signs of movement. She turned back to her right, handing her gear bag to Naralena. "Hold this," she whispered.

Jessica moved between the edge of the pier and a small boat, working her way around the front of the boat and then back aft along the far side of the boat.

She paused at the end of the boat, peering carefully around the stern at the pier, scanning its length back to the shore. She also scanned along the shore to the left of the pier. As best she could tell, there was no one around. The

events on the lake had not yet aroused the curiosity of the few who lived in this area.

She moved across the stern of the boat, back under the pier to rejoin Naralena. "I don't see anyone on the pier, or the shore," she whispered. "We should be able to walk right up onto the beach and disappear."

Naralena nodded her understanding as she handed Jessica's gear bag back to her.

Jessica moved quietly through the water from piling to piling, working her way toward the shore. Within a few minutes, her feet touched the soft bottom, and she began to walk up out of the water. Still waste deep, she paused, checking that Naralena was still close behind. She peaked out from under the edge of the pier, again scanning the small beach as well as the road higher up. She carefully checked the front of each building along the road, most of which were residences. Again, she saw no one. Despite the commotion elsewhere on the lake, the late hour had worked in their favor. This part of the lake appeared asleep.

"There," Jessica whispered. "Between those two buildings. The white one, and the brown one. They both look like shops, so there shouldn't be anyone around to wake right now. We head up the beach, cross the road, and duck between them."

"Understood," Naralena whispered back.

Jessica took one last look, then stepped out from under the pier and headed up the beach at a brisk jog, staying crouched down low as she ran. She reached the edge of the beach, ducking down low along the elevated road bed. She looked right and left, then signaled Naralena to follow.

Jessica popped her head up just enough to see over the roadway. As soon as Naralena arrived, she climbed up onto the road. "Stay with me," she ordered in hushed tones.

Jessica reached down and grabbed Naralena's hand, pulling her up onto the roadway, then ran across to the other side, moving quickly across the small parking lot and disappearing between the two buildings. Now in the darkness again, she paused long enough to listen for any sign that someone had seen them. After several moments, they continued carefully down the alleyway between the buildings until they reached the back lot.

Jessica looked about. The lot was just big enough for two or three vehicles to park. There was a fence along the back, but there was no separation between this lot and the next two lots down, other than a knee-high rail. "This will do," she said. She unsealed the front of her dry suit, splitting it down the middle enough to slip it off her shoulders.

Underneath their dry suits, they were both wearing non-descript black T-shirts and shorts. Jessica opened her gear bag and pulled out a pair of black pants which she slipped on. After putting on the shoes contained in her gear bag, she donned the jacket as well, and then the cap. Although the black attire might in itself draw suspicion, the style was in accordance to the signals intelligence they had gathered from this world during the last Falcon cold-coast through the Tau Ceti system. If spotted, they might be suspected of being up to nefarious acts, but they would at least appear to be natives of this world.

Once dressed, Jessica stuffed her dry suit into her gear bag and closed it again. She then took out the remote for the jump sub, punched in a code, and then pressed a button that would completely disable the device, and fry all of its circuits. She clutched it for a moment, making sure that it heated up as expected, then set it on the ground in front of them. "Okay, we find a place to hide out for the night. Preferably someplace where we can watch people come and

go for work in the morning. Then we break in and steal some clothes to better blend in, before we head into the city.”

“I know the mission plan,” Naralena replied.

Jessica could feel the tone in Naralena’s voice. “Look, if there...”

“You don’t have to say it, Jess,” Naralena replied. “I know. It sucks, but I know why it had to be done. So, I’m good.”

Jessica looked at Naralena. “Good to know, Avakian,” she replied. “Let’s move out.”

* * *

Sergeant Torwell sat in his jump seat just behind the cargo shuttle’s flight crew, facing aft through the narrow central corridor that connected the shuttle’s flight deck with its cargo deck. He stared at the ten Ghatazhak soldiers sitting in the cargo section, five along each side. They were as they had been since departure... unmoving. “Thirty-seven hours and it’s still creepin’ me out.”

“You’ve said that every hour, on the hour, since we jumped into the system,” the shuttle’s copilot stated as he stretched and yawned. “You would think cold-coasting so close to a Jung fleet would be what bothered you.”

“How can you sleep with those zombies sitting back there?” the sergeant wondered.

Ensign Latfee turned and looked at the sergeant as he finished yawning. “Those what?”

“Zombies,” the sergeant replied. “You know, the walking dead. They eat flesh...”

“You’ve been reading too many old Terran novels,” the ensign replied. “Those things will rot your brain. Try moving

forward a few centuries in the literature database... before you turn into one yourself.”

“You know,” the pilot chimed in, “I was seriously considering not warning you that we were coming up on the deploy point.”

Sergeant Torwell rotated his seat to his right, looking over his shoulder at the lieutenant piloting the shuttle. “You suck... sir.”

“Oh!” Ensign Latfee moaned. “You blew it, Kainan! That would have been fantastic!”

“How long?” an unfamiliar voice came over their comm-sets.

The sergeant jumped. “Oh, fuck!”

“You see!” Ensign Latfee exclaimed. “It could have been a hundred times better if you hadn’t opened your mouth.”

“Two minutes,” the lieutenant replied over the comms. He lowered his visor and activated the seal in order to pressurize his suit. “Close up, gentlemen.”

Sergeant Torwell rose from his seat and headed aft as he lowered his visor and activated the seal. He looked at the Ghatazhak lieutenant, who was smiling in the usual sinister fashion of the Ghatazhak. “Very funny, sir,” the sergeant responded as he took his seat at the forward end of the cargo deck.

“Ghatazhak!” Lieutenant Dorn beckoned. “Prepare to deploy.”

The remaining nine Ghatazhak soldiers, all clad in Ghatazhak space-jump suits opened their eyes, nearly in simultaneous fashion.

“You see, *that’s* creepy as well,” the sergeant exclaimed. “Maybe you guys could open your eyes one at a time or something.”

The sergeant was met with more sinister smiles from several of the Ghatazhak soldiers, as well as a look of casual disapproval from Lieutenant Dorn.

"Just a thought," the sergeant replied as he swung the control console out from the side and in front of him. "Starting depress cycle."

"Minute thirty," the copilot called out over the comms.

"Decreasing cargo bay gravity to fifty percent," the sergeant added. "Releasing clamps and umbilicals."

The Ghatazhak rose carefully from their seats as the clamps holding them in place disengaged from the mooring points on their jump rigs, then they turned aft.

"Depress complete," the sergeant reported. "Deploying cargo ramp."

The top edge of the aft bulkhead parted from the ceiling of the shuttle, and began to swing outward, pivoting on its deck-level hinges, slowly revealing the starry blackness of space behind them.

"One minute," the copilot announced as the cargo ramp leveled off.

"Ramp gravity is at twenty-five percent, gentlemen," the sergeant announced, "so tread carefully."

The Ghatazhak did not respond as they slowly lumbered out the open aft end of the cargo shuttle. As they stepped out onto the bulkhead that was now a ramp extending into open space, they felt themselves, and the massive jump rigs they carried, become lighter. They moved slowly out onto the ramp in two lines, then, once in position, they turned to face forward.

"I trust you have us facing in the correct direction," Lieutenant Dorn said as he turned to face forward.

"Pitched up to the correct attitude more than an hour ago," the copilot replied. "Thirty seconds to deployment

point.”

“Final checks,” the lieutenant instructed his men.

“Ten, good.”

“Nine, good.”

“Eight, good.”

The Ghatazhak continued to count off, one by one, until all nine of the lieutenant’s men had reported ready for deployment.

“One, good,” the lieutenant said, ending the count off. “Ready for deployment.”

“Ten seconds,” Ensign Latfee reported. “Stand by to disengage ramp gravity. Stand by to translate down relative.”

“Standing by,” the pilot replied.

“Deploy in three.....two.....one.....”

“Ramp gravity off,” the sergeant announced.

Lieutenant Dorn felt his body become even lighter as the ramp’s gravity disappeared.

“Translating down relative,” the pilot reported.

The lieutenant watched the open aft end of the cargo shuttle in which they had spent the last fifteen hours slowly move downward and away from them. He could feel his feet lose contact with the cargo shuttle’s loading ramp, as it moved away from them. “Positive separation,” he confirmed over the comms.

“One meter separation and increasing,” the copilot reported.

Sergeant Torwell watched as the legs of the ten Ghatazhak soldiers rose upward, finally disappearing from view. “Jumpers are clear,” he announced. “Closing up.”

Lieutenant Dorn looked downward as the shuttle's large aft cargo ramp began to swing upward again. Being the forward-most element in the formation of free-floating Ghatazhak meant that if the ramp would clear him, it would clear them all.

"Two meters separation," the copilot reported.

The lieutenant watched the ramp swing closed, once again sealing off the aft end of the cargo shuttle. "We are clear."

"Changing course," the copilot announced. *"Turning to departure heading. Three meters separation."*

The lieutenant watched as the cargo shuttle fired its maneuvering thrusters, yawing to port and pitching down and away from the Ghatazhak. A moment later, it fired its four main thrusters at very low power and began to pull away from the formation of Ghatazhak, heading for one of the nearby moons of Weldon.

The lieutenant angled his head upward, looking at the distant planet ahead of them. At their current speed, it would take them nearly five Takaran days to reach their target and begin their descent to the surface. It would be the longest low-metabolic state sleep he and his men had ever attempted, and it would take them right to the limits of their life-support systems. Unfortunately, it could not be helped. Had they allowed the shuttle to move any closer, the likelihood of being detected by the Jung forces in orbit over Weldon would increase dramatically. As it was, they had to time their transition precisely to remain far away from the ships orbiting above the planet, in order to increase their chances of reaching the surface undetected. If any of those ships were to change orbit, if a new ship was to arrive at an inopportune time, or if one of those ships happened to notice a small, man-made metallic object

coasting past them a few hundred kilometers away, the mission would be over.

"Seven meters separation," the shuttle's copilot reported as the shuttle continued its low-power burn to alter its course to take it around the far side of the nearby moon. *"We'll be beyond local comms range in ten seconds, Lieutenant."*

"Understood."

"Good luck, sir," Ensign Latfee said, his voice becoming faint and garbled as the shuttle continued to move away from them.

The lieutenant did not respond, knowing that the shuttle was already beyond the range limits of their local comms. He glanced at the data display on the inside of his visor. Their trajectory and speed was perfect, and the countdown timer to the next way point was running. "Gentlemen, time to go back to sleep."

Sergeant Torwell returned to his jump seat at the back of the flight deck and swung up his faceplate. "I still can't believe those guys are going to float out there for five days." The sergeant removed his helmet. "Are they really going to zombie-sleep the entire time?"

"How the hell did you even find such books?" Lieutenant Kainan wondered. "There have got to be millions of titles from the last Terran century alone, and from all of them, you chose zombies?"

"Josh turned me onto them."

"Figures," Ensign Latfee said.

"And why would you listen to Cadet Hayes?" the lieutenant wondered. "The kid's an idiot."

"He's one hell of a pilot, though," Ensign Latfee defended.

"Being a great pilot doesn't mean he's not an idiot," the lieutenant insisted.

"I don't know," the sergeant said. "He seems pretty smart to me. He's well read, that's for sure."

"It's only because he has so much cold-coast time under his belt," the lieutenant insisted.

"One minute to orbit," Ensign Latfee reported.

"Perhaps you should be taking your reading recommendations from Cadet Sheehan," the lieutenant suggested. "He appears to be the brains of that team."

"Perhaps you're right," the sergeant said. "He reads mostly tech manuals. At least they would put me to sleep. Then I wouldn't have to stare at those damned zombie Ghatazhak the whole time."

"We're on orbital intercept trajectory for Markus," Ensign Latfee announced.

"Very well," the lieutenant replied. "We should be on the far side in about seven hours. Then we can power up and jump home."

"I can't wait," the sergeant exclaimed with a sigh of relief. "Being this close to the Jung just does not sit right with me."

"It doesn't sit right with any of us, Sergeant," the lieutenant agreed. "But someone has to do it."

"Just do me a favor, sir, and don't volunteer us next time. Give someone else a chance, will you?"

CHAPTER FOUR

"What makes you so sure no one will come home?" Naralena asked in a whisper as they moved along the back side of the small home.

"We've been watching this house for hours," Jessica explained, "ever since sunrise. Hell, we've been watching all of the homes around here. Only one person left for work, and no one came home from work the entire morning. It's early afternoon already," she continued, pointing at the sun's position in the Koharan sky. "I'm pretty sure that most of these are vacation homes."

"What are vacation homes?" Naralena wondered.

"Small homes outside of big cities, usually someplace quiet and relaxing. People go there on the weekends to get away from the city."

"You people have more than one home?" Naralena was shocked at the luxury.

"Not everyone," Jessica replied as she stepped up on the back porch of the home. "My family didn't. Of course, we lived in an area where most people *wanted* to have a vacation home, so..." Jessica lifted her jacket's waistband and pulled a small, Takaran energy pistol out of her belt.

"I thought you said no one would be home?" Naralena wondered, noticing the weapon.

"Telles taught me a trick," she replied as she manipulated the controls on the weapon. "If you put this thing on a super-low power setting, you can use it to discharge a small amount of superheated plasma. The

Ghatazhak use something similar to start campfires in the field.”

“You’re going to burn the door down?”

“No,” Jessica replied, shaking her head in dismay. “I’m going to try and melt a hole in the glass so that I can open the door.”

“Sorry,” Naralena said, noticing Jessica’s reaction. “I don’t have much experience in special operations.”

Jessica placed the tip of the weapon’s barrel against the window glass just above the doorknob and pressed the trigger. The pistol began to emit a barely audible whine as a red-hot circle appeared in the glass around the tip of its barrel. Jessica instinctively pulled the weapon away as she released the trigger, feeling the intense heat from the melting glass. “Damn, that *is* hot,” she said. The glowing red circle gradually faded away, revealing a ten centimeter hole in the glass, with still-molten glass cooling and congealing around the edge. “It worked,” she declared as she positioned the weapon for a second shot. A moment later, the ten centimeter circle had become an oval, and after a third shot, it was more than big enough for Jessica to stick her hand through without getting burned by the still-hot edges.

“What if there is an alarm?”

“Does this place look like the kind of home that would have an alarm?”

Naralena looked at the dilapidated structure and the unkempt yard. “I guess not.”

“There is only one way to find out,” Jessica said as she reached down the inside of the door and unlocked it. She carefully withdrew her hand, then turned the knob and pulled the door open slowly, pausing after it was open about twenty centimeters to see if an alarm went off. She looked

at Naralena for several seconds. "Nothing. No alarm." She pulled the door all the way opened and slipped inside. "Come on," she instructed, ushering Naralena inside and closing the door again behind her.

Jessica reached up and pulled down the shade over the window she had just burned a hole in and then stood upright again. "First we do a quick search to make sure no one is home," she whispered.

"What do we do if we find someone?" Naralena asked, her eyes widening and a look of uncertainty on her face.

"Subdue and detain."

Naralena's eyes became even wider. "Of course," she whispered following Jessica into the next room.

They entered the living room of the home and moved quietly across to the small hallway on the other side of the room. Jessica could see out the small, eye-level window in the front door to the street outside as they passed, noting that there was still no traffic going by.

Jessica moved down the hallway, her small energy pistol still in her right hand. She stopped at an open doorway to her left and peeked inside. It was a small bedroom, with a single bed, a dresser, and a small desk. It appeared to be a child's room, and it was unoccupied.

Inspections of the next two bedrooms revealed similar results. Beds, dressers, chairs, wardrobes... but no people.

"It looks like no one is home," Jessica announced. "And judging by the temperature in here, they haven't been here within the last day or two."

A look of relief washed across Naralena's face. "What do we do now?"

"You start going through the master bedroom. Look for anything that might be of use to us. Clothing, whatever kind

of currency or payment devices they might use. Portable comm devices, wireless phones, computing devices.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I saw something in the living room that looked like a computer terminal. Intel says this world has a global public network, so I’m going to see if we can access it.”

* * *

Abby sat at her desk, studying the most recent expansion proposals for Terran settlement on Tanna. Although she often thought about her days on the Aurora, as well as the years she had spent with her father developing the jump drive, she was happy to have a normal life once again. As mundane as her job might seem, it did allow her to keep regular, predictable hours, and it even provided a degree of flexibility as well. The lack of mental stimulation was a small price to pay for the ability to be with her family, to share meals with them, and kiss them goodnight... every night. It was a luxury that had all too often been sacrificed during the decade-long development project. Even worse had been the fact that, as a result of that decade of sacrifice, she had been separated from her family for nearly a year. However, that was all in the past. Now, she was where she wanted to be, living the life that she had so desperately missed all those years, and with each and every moment, she tried her best to make up for all the lost time. Never again would she return to that life. Never again would she put her family second... Not for anything.

Or so she thought.

“Abby?” a familiar voice called from her office doorway.

A chill ran down Abby's spine as she recognized the voice. She hesitated for a moment, then looked up from her desk. Standing in the doorway, wearing clothing befitting the average Terran immigrant, was Captain Nathan Scott. "Oh, my God," she gasped softly.

"May I?" Nathan asked.

Abby stumbled for words for a brief moment. "Of course."

Nathan stepped into her office, closing the door gently behind him, as if trying not to attract attention. "You look great," he said, flashing his usual charming smile that automatically engendered trust in him by anyone who was greeted with it. "Your new life must be agreeing with you."

"Uh... It has... I mean, it does," Abby replied, fumbling for words. "I'm surprised to see you, Captain..."

"I'm not a captain today," he replied, pulling at the lapel of his overcoat. "Just Nathan. I'm traveling incognito."

Abby chuckled at the thought as she rose to greet him. "How did you get in here?" she wondered as she came out from behind her desk and gave him a hug. "Usually, the receptionist warns me if someone is coming back to see me."

"I told her I was your cousin and that I just arrived from Earth and wanted to surprise you. I guess security is not that tight around here."

"Not really, no," she confirmed as she returned to her seat behind her desk. "Please," she said, pointing to the chair on his side of the desk. She took a deep breath, collecting her thoughts, which were racing at the moment. "Forgive me, Nathan, it's not that I'm not happy to see you. Honestly, I am quite happy to see you, but I'm also afraid to ask what brought you here."

"A jump shuttle, actually. Josh and Loki flew me over. They're back at the spaceport."

Abby smiled. "You know what I mean."

"Hey, can't a guy visit an old friend?"

"In the middle of a war?"

"Yeah, Cameron said you wouldn't buy that," Nathan replied. "She says 'hello', by the way."

"How is she?"

"Good," Nathan answered. "The Celestia is in dry dock now. She got beaten up pretty badly. She'll probably be in there for a few months, at least."

"And Jessica?"

"She's on a mission," Nathan told her. "I can't say where. Classified, and all that. Left a couple of days ago."

"I see. Well, it is good to know that everyone is alright," Abby said.

"You didn't ask about Vlad," Nathan wondered.

Abby laughed. "No, I didn't."

Nathan also laughed. "He's also fine, busy fixing up the ship, as usual."

"So, why did you come, Nathan?" Abby asked.

"Well, since you didn't buy the 'came to visit a friend' bit, I'll get straight to the point. We've struck up an agreement with the Tannans to build a production facility on their world."

"What kind of production facility?" Abby asked, suspicion in her tone.

"Fast-attack ships," he explained, "based on the old Scout-class designs."

"What does that have to do with me?" Abby asked. "I have no expertise in such matters."

"They are going to be jump-capable, Abby."

“You don’t need me for that,” she insisted. “Surely by now the Corinairans are as good with jump tech as we are. The Takarans are probably even better.”

“Perhaps,” Nathan agreed. “Montgomery was certainly an innovative thinker, but we don’t necessarily want that type of thinking. Montgomery was a greater risk taker, much like the second STS team that built the Celestia’s drive. You and your father were more meticulous, more careful.”

“You would think that in times like these you would want your research and development people to take risks,” Abby said.

“Yes and no. In this case, we need those jump drives to be capable and reliable. We don’t want to push the envelope. Reliability, precision, ease of operation, and ease of maintenance. That’s what Admiral Dumar wants from the fast-attack ships.”

“Why base them on the Scout ship design?” Abby wondered. “Isn’t that a thirty year-old design?”

“Yes, but that’s what makes them so attractive. The infrastructure required to build them is far less advanced than that required to build something like the Aurora.”

“But aren’t they small, and less powerful?”

“Yes, but they are also far easier to build, and take far less time. In the time it would take to build a single Explorer-class ship, we could build more than a hundred fast-attack ships. Besides, we’ve already outfitted the last three surviving Scout-class ships with jump drives and plasma cannons. They’ve been taking frigates one on one, and winning. A pack of half a dozen could probably take down a cruiser. Not to mention the fact that with the short-range, rapid-jump systems, they can travel farther and faster than an Explorer-class ship. Hell, that’s why I took a shuttle here.

It would have taken the Aurora over thirty hours to get here."

Abby shook her head. "I still don't see why you need *me* involved in this project, Nathan."

"Nobody knows the jump drive better than you do, Abby," Nathan insisted. "Oh, the Takaran scientists may have more complete theories on what actually happens when you jump, but they don't understand the technology itself. Not like you do."

"I'm not so sure about that," Abby disagreed. She looked at Nathan. "There's something else, something you're not telling me."

Nathan leaned back in his chair. "I had a feeling you were going to call me on this one as well." He frowned. "You're worse than my sister."

Abby just continued looking at him, waiting.

"It's a matter of trust," Nathan began, "or rather, who to trust. You see, we have reason to believe that we have at least one, or more, spies in our ranks."

"How do you know?"

"We don't, not really," Nathan admitted. "During the last attack on Sol, when the Karuzara rammed the Jung battle platform, their boarding parties went straight for the Falcon bays. Not the regular ones, the ones that were jump-capable. They almost got away with one. If it hadn't been for Josh and Loki chasing them down, micro-jumping across the system, they would have." Nathan shifted in his chair, looking Abby in the eyes more intently. "Long ago, you told me that unless the jump emitter array was powered up and nearly ready to discharge, the presence of a jump drive wouldn't be detectable."

"That's correct."

"Then someone had to have sent a message to the battle platform, in the middle of battle, perhaps only minutes before impact, about those jump-capable Falcons and where they could be found."

"So you're here because..."

"We can't trust anyone else," Nathan explained. "We've only got a handful of scientists with us who know enough about the jump drive to be able to sell us out to the Jung, and we've had to take steps to isolate them. We've even stopped fabricating mini-jump drives, and have sent the technicians involved in their production back to the Pentaurus cluster for now. We simply can't take any chances."

"Couldn't they sell their knowledge to the Jung from the Pentaurus cluster?" Abby wondered.

"Yes, but nowhere near as easily. We want to isolate the production of jump drives to this world."

"How is that any better?" Abby asked. "There are millions of people on this planet as well. The Jung were here for something like ten or twenty years, I think. Surely they have spies here as well?"

"Possibly, yes," Nathan agreed. "But we weren't planning on building them *on* Tanna. We were going to build them on the asteroid base. There's plenty of room in the old Jung fighter base."

"But there is no orbital assembly platform here," Abby reminded him, "and I doubt there's enough room on the little asteroid to build them there."

"We don't need an OAP," Nathan explained. "We build fast-attack ships here, on the surface."

"And, how do you plan on getting them to orbit?"

"That won't be a problem, thanks to you and your father," Nathan said, grinning. "We build them on dollies,

sitting on tracks. Once they're done, we roll them out the door and down a hill, letting them pick up just enough speed to get far enough up the incline at the other end, and then jump them to high orbit. Once in orbit, they light their mains and accelerate to maintain orbit."

Abby's mouth was agape. "That's brilliant!" she exclaimed. "Simple, yet brilliant."

Nathan chuckled again. "Then you're not going to like it when I tell you whose idea it was."

"Not Vlad's." Abby moaned. "Oh, please tell me it wasn't Vlad's idea."

"Sorry."

Abby sighed. "I don't know, Nathan. That's a hell of a commute each day."

Nathan noticed the wry smile on Abby's face. "You won't have to be on site the entire time," he assured her. "You can work from home as much as is feasible, and we can even arrange for you to keep your current cover in place. No one here will know what you're really doing, and no one at either plant will know where you are really living."

"How are you going to manage that?"

"We'll provide you with a Tannan shuttle, equipped with a jump drive. They'll be on standby to take you wherever you wish, at a moment's notice."

"It will have to be a crew that we both can trust," Abby reminded him, "especially if you think we have a spy in our midst."

"I think I know two pilots we can trust," Nathan replied with a grin.

Abby returned the smile, knowing of whom Nathan spoke.

"You used the pronouns 'we' and 'our'," Nathan observed. "Does that mean you're on board?"

"No, it does not," Abby corrected him, sternly. "I mean, I'm not saying no... yet. I have to talk with my husband first. After all that he has been through recently, I believe I owe him the right to make this decision for us."

Nathan put his charming smile back on, adding his big round blue eyes to the mix as well, in an obvious attempt to persuade her to agree to accept the position. "But you *want* to take the job, don't you."

"Don't give me those big blue eyes, Nathan Scott," Abby scolded. "I'm not falling for them. Not this time."

* * *

"I found a few things that we can use," Naralena said as she entered the living room carrying a handful of clothing. "They probably aren't going to fit either of us correctly, but they..." She paused, looking over Jessica's shoulder at the computer terminal's screen. "What are you doing?"

"I'm posting contact messages on network forums," Jessica replied as she continued to type.

"You really think that is going to work?"

"It's part of the contact protocol. I post precisely worded messages in various net forums, with user IDs that spell out a code word when a special algorithm is applied."

"But you can't just post 'Hey, spies from Earth have arrived, give us a call,' right? So how do you communicate with them?"

"The original EDF operatives were issued decryption algorithms that they had to memorize. When they see a user ID that has certain character combinations, they apply the algorithms to see if any of them decrypt the user ID to spell out the contact code word."

"Which is?"

“Erda.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. It’s an old English word from, I don’t know, a few thousand years ago.”

“It means ‘Earth’ in Angla,” Naralena said.

Jessica paused, turning to look at her. “No shit?”

“No shit.”

“What are the odds?” Jessica said, turning back to the computer screen. “Anyway, they then take whichever algorithm converted the user ID into ‘Erda’, increase its factors by the local date on the message, and then use it to decrypt the message. And let me tell you, it is not easy to compose a message that looks normal to everyone else on the forum, but still spells out your intended message when decrypted.”

“What message are you trying to give them,” Naralena asked, “assuming any of them are still alive?”

“‘Erda command request contact within 7 same method,’” Jessica replied, “and I’m betting there are at least three of them still alive and kicking.”

“How do you know?” Naralena wondered.

“Because the forums they host are still active,” Jessica explained. “If they were dead, the forums would get shut down due to lack of payment for the hosting services.”

“Unless someone else took them over, or started one years later with the same name.”

Jessica paused again, looking at Naralena once more. “I hadn’t thought of that.” Her face crinkled as she realized that Naralena was wearing a different shirt.

“Like it?” Naralena wondered. “I found several of them in the closet. It’s a little big on me, which means it will definitely be big on you, but I think if we pin them back a

bit, maybe cover them with a loose fitting sweater or something, they'll work."

Jessica returned her attention to the computer. "I never made you for a fashion plate."

"How could you?" Naralena said. "All we ever wear on board are uniforms," she said as she reexamined the other blouses and sweaters she had brought out. "You know, this is the first time I have been off that ship in months."

Jessica finished typing the last message, pressing the submit button. "There. That's the last one."

"So, what do we do now? Sit here and wait for a response?" Naralena wondered.

"I wish it were that easy." Jessica stood up from the chair and picked up one of the blouses, holding it up against her body. "What do you think?"

"Wrong color," Naralena said. "How long do you think it will take to get a response, assuming that you're correct and one of your operatives is still alive?"

"Could take days, or even weeks. Unfortunately, we only have four weeks to complete our mission. So, in the meantime, we're going to need to look around on our own, which means we need to get to the capital, Cetia. Unfortunately, we're on the wrong side of the lake."

"Surely they have some sort of transit system here."

"Sure, they have a train that can get us there in a few hours; I checked. But that requires money. More specifically, it requires Jung credits."

"Like these?" Naralena wondered, a smile on her face. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a Jung hundred-credit chip, waving it in the air in front of her face.

"Nice," Jessica said. "Where did you find it?"

"It was in a card on the dresser. I think it was a gift or something. I feel kind of bad about taking it, actually."

“Well, I don’t,” Jessica said, snatching the credit chip from Naralena’s hand. “This chip will get us both to Cetia. It might even get us a hotel room for a few days, while we wait for someone to respond to our requests.” She put the credit chip in her pocket. “What else did you find?”

“Some bags, a few snacks in the kitchen, and the clothing. That’s pretty much it. Oh, and this thing,” Naralena added, pulling a small, flat device from her front pocket. “I think it’s their version of a data pad,” she said, handing the device to Jessica.

Jessica briefly examined the device. “I think you’re right. Let’s hope it’ll connect to the planet’s global network. That will make things a lot easier.”

“So, when do we leave?” Naralena wondered.

“Not until tomorrow morning,” Jessica explained. “There’re only two trains per day, both in the morning, and the last one left a few minutes ago. Besides, we should probably clean up first. We both look, and smell, like we just crawled out of a lake, remember?”

“Trust me, I remember,” Naralena answered. “Are you sure it’s safe to stay here that long?”

“Honestly, no. But we don’t have much choice. We’ll get cleaned up and ready to go, then get a good night’s sleep. We can take shifts keeping a lookout, in case whoever owns this place *does* show up.”

* * *

Cameron stepped up to the podium in the Karuzara’s main conference room. Sitting in front of her were the first one hundred volunteers from Earth who had passed the security screening process. They came from all the worlds of the Alliance, except for the newest member, Copora. As

these people would become crew members on the Celestia and the Aurora, they had been carefully selected. Not only was their screening process far more rigorous, but the required skills and experience were far higher as well. While the majority of the volunteers were from the Pentaurus cluster, at least a quarter of them were from Earth, and had undergone even more intense scrutiny by both Commander Telles's security teams as well as those of Lieutenant Commander Nash.

"My name is Captain Cameron Taylor. I am the commanding officer of the Celestia, and I will be in charge of your training. As you all know, the Celestia is in dry dock, and is expected to be there for several months. While this leaves us down a ship, it also provides us an excellent facility in which to conduct your training. As the Aurora is the only Explorer-class ship in service at the moment, and she is understaffed, upon completion of your training, you shall all be assigned to her. Some of you have previous military experience, and some of you have time in space in various disciplines. While this can certainly be of benefit, it can also be a hindrance, as you will quickly learn that things aboard a jump-capable warship can be quite different than what you are used to. Those of you without such experience, although not burdened with the need to unlearn old ways, will have to work twice as hard to keep up with your crewmates."

Cameron paused a moment, examining the faces of the volunteers before continuing. "Your training shall be broken into four modules, the first one being basic ship's procedures, nomenclature, and safety protocols. This training will be conducted in the classrooms on this base. In module two, you will become acclimated with the areas of the ship in which you will serve, as well as the areas in

which you will live while under way. As both the Aurora and the Celestia are no longer FTL ships, their accommodations and facilities are being converted from long-term into short-term support environments, as the majority of our missions will last hours or days, rather than weeks or months. This means that the usual amenities and distractions that one might find available to them during off-duty hours will no longer be available. Unfortunately, these sacrifices are necessary to enable us to install better, more effective weapons and defensive systems on board. The third module of your training shall consist of drills and simulations, of every type and situation conceivable. This will be the most difficult part of your training, and will last the longest. In order to be effective in battle, your actions must be automatic... accurate and without forethought. You must be able to follow orders without question. More importantly, you must be able to take the initiative and solve problems on your own, in the absence of command personnel."

Cameron paused again. "The fourth and final module will be the most important module of all... damage control training. When the call goes out for damage control parties in your section, you have to know what to do, as not only will your lives depend on it, but so shall the lives of the rest of the crew."

Cameron looked at them again to emphasize her point. "Make no mistake about it. The ships on which you have volunteered to serve will be going in harm's way... repeatedly. Many of us *will* die. In war, that is a foregone conclusion, one that cannot be escaped. But living or dying is *not* what any of you should care about at this point. All you *should* care about is doing your jobs to the best of your ability. *That* is how you survive in combat. *Do* your jobs, and most of us *will* survive this conflict. Then you will go home

to your loved ones and tell them stories about your adventures, and about the brave crewmates who did *not* survive.”

Cameron cleared her throat as she let her words sink in. “To my left is my executive officer, Commander Kovacic. He is second-in-command of the *Celestia* as well as the coordinator of your training program. To my right is Master Chief Montrose, the *Celestia*’s chief of the boat. You will answer to them, as if answering to me.”

Cameron paused again, taking one last look at the faces gathered before turning the podium over to her XO. She noticed Nathan standing in the doorway to the left of the podium, smiling. “And now I’ll turn you over to the XO and the COB to pass out your assignments and get your training under way.” Cameron turned to Commander Kovacic. “Commander?”

“Thank you, sir,” Commander Kovacic said, stepping up to the podium.

Cameron stepped down and moved off to the left, toward Nathan, who was still standing at the doorway with his usual goofy smile that, he thought, was charming.

“Nice speech,” Nathan said as she approached.

“Thanks, but I plagiarized a lot of it from the European EDF Academy’s CO... from my first day there.”

“I thought it had a familiar tone. Sounded a lot like the one I heard on my first day.”

“Where’s your shadow?” Cameron asked as they started down the corridor.

“He went with Naralena and Jess.”

“To the Tau Ceti System?”

“Yup.”

“I can see Weatherly, but Naralena?”

"I guess Jessica's Jung just wasn't cutting it," Nathan explained. "Dumar decided they would have a better chance if Naralena went along and did the talking. The sergeant went along as a bodyguard."

Cameron noticed he was still smiling as they headed down the corridor. "So, I gather by that goofy look on your face that Abby accepted the position?"

"Was there every any doubt?" Nathan asked.

"Actually, yes," Cameron said. "I don't know that I would be willing to come back. Not after all that happened, and not after being separated from her family for so long."

"Exactly why I made sure that she wouldn't be separated from them any more than she already is at her current job."

* * *

Jessica stepped off the train and onto the platform. The underground station appeared much like the ones she had seen in many of the larger cities on Earth. Electronic signs displayed arrival and departure information. Hordes of travelers wound their way through crowds of people waiting for trains.

Being a core world, and the second one to be colonized by Earth back before the bio-digital plague, Kohara had once been a thriving, fully industrialized society. It had also been one of the few core worlds to rival the Earth in both its population and level of technological development. Based on what they had seen thus far, if the capital city was representative of the entire planet, then Kohara had recovered from the plague quite nicely. She had to wonder how much the Jung had to do with the Tau Ceti system's recovery.

The purpose of her mission was to determine just that. For if the Jung *had* been the cause of the system's impressive recovery, then its people might not approve of outsiders coming in and wiping their system clean of Jung influence. They needed to know how the Cetians truly felt about the Jung. Did they see them as enslavers, or saviors?

At this moment, the people of Kohara did not appear to be enslaved. Then again, many worlds quickly adapt to changes in political control. For the most part, their lives go on as usual, for the destruction of assets is usually of little benefit to the invading party. However, they had already seen that the Jung were often willing to sacrifice such assets in order to send a clear message.

If the people of Tau Ceti preferred to be part of the Jung Empire, then the Alliance might be better served to simply destroy the Jung's space forces in the Tau Ceti system. After all, the primary goal of the Alliance was not to liberate the core, but to protect it, and the Jung's ground forces were no threat to any members of the Alliance, as long as they had no way out of the system. If indeed these people did not want to be liberated from the Jung, the Alliance had neither the interest nor the resources to do so. They simply wanted the Jung ships removed from the system, for their proximity to Sol constituted a grave threat to the people of Earth.

Naralena stepped up next to Jessica and started reading the signs. "That way," she said in Jung, pointing toward a wide escalator that led up to the next level. "That will take us to street level."

Jessica had to take a moment to translate Naralena's words. As much as they had practiced the Jung language over the past few weeks, she still was not very proficient. The Cetian language was a different story. It was a strange mix of Spanish and French, both of which Jessica had

studied at the EDF Academy's language institute. She'd even had an opportunity to study the Cetian language during her last year at the Academy, a full decade after the first real intelligence from Kohara had reached Earth. Fortunately, despite the fact that the Jung had controlled the Tau Ceti for nearly fifty years, and Jung *was* considered the official language of the planet, most people still spoke their native language on a daily basis. With any luck, Jessica would be seen as just another one of the millions of Cetians who couldn't quite grasp all the subtle nuances of the Jung language.

After pressing their way through the crowd and riding the escalator up what felt like several floors, they found themselves following the crowd as they spilled out onto the streets of Cetia. As the crowd dispersed, they found themselves pushed out into a wide courtyard, surrounded on all sides by tall buildings of sparkling glass. They looked upward, marveling at the structures that surrounded them. Dozens of pedestrian and transit runs, both enclosed and open, spanned the open air between buildings. Utility vehicles of all shapes and sizes floated along overhead in orderly fashion, many of them appearing to be unmanned. This world was at least a hundred years ahead of Earth... At least their civilization was.

"It's rather overpowering the first time you see it, isn't it?" a young man said in Jung.

"Indeed it is," Naralena replied, her Cetian-Jung accent near perfect.

"First time in Cetia?"

"Yes. How did you know?" Naralena wondered.

The man smiled. "Your eyes. Everyone who comes here for the first time ends up standing here, eyes wide, staring at all that is above them."

"We do not have this where we live," Naralena replied.

Jessica wondered why Naralena was allowing herself to get sucked into a conversation with a local who could very well be Jung.

"And where is that?" the man asked politely.

"The far side of the lake. I am from Elsenor, and she is from Palidess."

"I have been to Elsenor," the man said. "With my parents, when I was but a child. The water is much warmer there."

"We get more sunlight and less wind than you do here."

"Indeed you do," the man agreed, checking his watch. "The hour is late, and I have a train to catch. Enjoy your stay in Cetia."

"Thank you, we shall," Naralena replied as the man turned and departed.

Jessica watched the man until he disappeared into the entrance for the underground station they had just departed. "Why did you talk to that guy for so long?"

"I just wanted to see how my Jung would hold up," Naralena explained, surprised by Jessica's concern. "Why?"

"Just, don't be all chatty with everyone, alright? We don't want to draw attention to ourselves."

"Well, we already did so by looking up all wide-eyed at the buildings, didn't we? I was just playing the role that he already perceived for us. If anything, I think that would dissuade any suspicion on his part."

"Right." Jessica looked around. "I think that's a cafe over there. Let's go get something to eat while we get the lay of the land."

"Should we be spending what few credits we have on food?" Naralena asked as they walked across the courtyard toward the cafe.

"Perhaps not, but the first thing people do after a long train ride is eat. So if we're playing the part of tourists, that's the way to do it. Besides, we can always order something on the cheap."

"Makes sense."

"So what do you feel like?" Jessica asked.

"What kind of food do they eat here?" Naralena wondered.

"I have no idea," Jessica said, "but at least we can be reasonably certain they don't serve molo."

* * *

"I really don't know why you're complaining," Loki said as he finished checking the jump shuttle's flight computer. "It's only a temporary assignment."

"Look where we're sitting, Loki," Josh exclaimed, gesturing at the shuttle's cockpit. "Yesterday, we were flying the toughest combat ship around. Today, we're flying a taxicab."

"A jump taxicab," Loki emphasized.

"Oh, well, that makes all the difference in the world, doesn't it," Josh retorted.

"Come on, Josh. It's not that bad. We've passed all the maneuvers Prechitt threw at us. Now all we have to do is pass the written and we're done. At least this way, we'll have time to study."

"You mean, I'll have time to study," Josh reminded. "You already know all that crap."

"I meant *we* as in I'll help you study." Loki glanced at the status screens on his side of the console. "Reactor is online, mains and maneuvering show ready, nav and jump computers are coming up now."

"This is going to be so boring."

"Would you rather be doing cold-coast recon again?" Loki wondered, "Because that's what everyone else is going to be doing for the next week."

"Actually?" Josh stopped to think about the question. "No, I guess not. At least this gig will allow me to use a toilet instead of a relief tube."

"Exactly." Loki keyed his comm-set. "Karuzara Flight, Jumper Two Four, ready for roll out."

"Jumper Two Four, Karuzara Flight, rolling you out now."

"At least on Tanna there won't be any of this auto-flight crap," Josh realized. "I *hate* auto-flight."

Loki watched out the forward and starboard windows as the shuttle backed away from the inside wall of the terminal area in the Karuzara asteroid base's number four flight operations hangar. On either side he could see personnel shuttles, lined up in a perfect row. Ground crews moved about with practiced precision as they processed ships coming and going from the busy terminal. This was the main hub for all passenger traffic traveling between the Karuzara and Earth, and it was busy around the clock.

Loki called up the departure checklist on the middle display screen and began tapping items with his finger to mark them as checked and ready as the shuttle began to rotate to starboard.

"What are we going to do for food while we are sitting around waiting for Abby to need us?" Josh wondered as he ran down his own checklist.

"I'm sure there will be someplace to eat. Besides, the mess gave us a cold box full of stuff."

Josh glanced up as their shuttle rolled into the transition airlock, coming to a stop only a meter away from the outer door. "At least the food here is better than on the Aurora."

“Worse comes to worse, we can always jump back here if need be,” Loki reminded him. “It’s not like it takes that long.”

“Jumper Two Four, you’re in the lock. Cycling now,” the controller’s voice announced over the comm-sets.

“Two Four, in the lock and cycling,” Loki acknowledged. He reached up to the center console and began flipping switches. “Maneuvering is active, mains are on standby, nav and jump computers are ready.”

The lights in the transition airlock dimmed to match the lighting in the main cavern, just as the outer airlock doors began to part, revealing the massive inner cavern at the center of the Karuzara asteroid. Before them, the Aurora sat motionless, moored to the main dock. The cavern itself had been made even bigger during the asteroid’s month-long transition back to Earth. However, the Aurora still occupied nearly a third of its volume.

On the other side of the dock, Scout ships One and Two were also moored. Work crews fluttered about the exterior of the two ships.

“What are they doing to the Scout ships?” Josh wondered.

“They’re getting shields,” Loki told him.

“The real ones, or the crappy hull-huggers like we have?”

“The real ones,” Loki replied. “I heard some techs in the mess talking. Three-meter separation from their hulls, and articulating.”

“Lucky bastards.”

“Jumper Two Four, ready for departure,” Loki reported over the comm-set as the outer airlock doors reached their fully opened position.

“Copy Two Four,” the controller replied. *“Taking you out now.”*

The shuttle's maneuvering thrusters shot a brief spurt of accelerated propellant out of their thrust ports as the artificial gravity in the transition airlock faded. The shuttle lifted gently off the deck and then began to move slowly forward, their velocity increasing with each spurt of the aft thrusters.

The shuttle moved out of the airlock and out into the massive central cavern. All around, work sleds flittered about, traveling in every direction as they moved workers, equipment, materials, and crawlers between the hangars in which they were loaded and the work sites which they were supporting.

"Damn," Josh exclaimed. "I can see why they have us on auto-flight." He looked at Loki. "Is it always like this?"

"I don't really know," Loki admitted. "I guess it's because they're trying to get as much fixed on the Aurora as possible before the next mission."

"I miss Porto Santo already," Josh sighed. "Warm sunshine, ocean air, beaches..."

"Hey, at least they'll be fitting our ship with an auto-polarizing canopy," Loki reminded him.

"That's true," Josh agreed. "It will be nice not to lose sight of the console whenever we jump."

The shuttle began to accelerate quickly, flying up and over the majority of the smaller traffic as it made its way around the outer perimeter of the main cavern. A minute later, the ship dove downward and then rolled to the right, turning into the main tunnel that led to open space.

Once inside the main tunnel and away from the dizzying array of traffic, the shuttle accelerated further, reaching the last section in only a few minutes.

"Mains are coming up," Loki announced. "Thirty seconds to open space."

"Jumper Two Four, Karuzara Flight. Threshold in twenty seconds. Prepare for auto-flight release."

Loki looked over at Josh, who was placing his hands on the controls as a precaution. "Flight, Two Four, ready for release."

"Two Four, release in five. Good flight."

Josh watched the status light as it turned from blue to green. "I've got her," he announced as the Karuzara asteroid's flight operations control center released the shuttle from auto-flight control.

"Karuzara Flight, Two Four has control. Good day," Loki replied over the comms. "Steer one five seven, up twelve relative. Make speed of one nine zero, for the jump point," he instructed Josh.

"One five seven, up twelve, one nine zero," Josh replied.

"Loading jump series to Tanna," Loki announced.

"On course and speed for jump," Josh reported.

"Jump series loaded and ready. Activating jump-nav sequencer," Loki continued. "Jump sequence in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

The windows on the cockpit of the ship, and the portholes in the passenger compartment, all turned opaque as the shuttle executed the first of thirty-two sequential jumps.

"Jump one, complete," Loki reported. "Jump two in one twenty..."

"Loki, we talked about this," Josh scolded. "You don't have to announce every jump. I can see the jump status screen as well, you know."

"Sorry." Loki continued to watch the jump computer as it verified their position and made adjustments to the next jump. In between each jump, the shuttle's autopilot would make any adjustments necessary to keep them on course

throughout the series of jumps. For the most part, all they had to do was sit back and enjoy the ride, which was exactly what Josh intended to do. Loki, on the other hand, preferred to monitor the system. Although the automatic sequencing for multi-hop jump routes had been in service for several months, the idea of a computer hopping them across the sector in one and a half light year jumps with less than a minute to recalculate each jump, still did not sit easy with him. It was a fact that Josh found amusing, since Loki had always been the one who was enamored with automated systems, while Josh had always been what Captain Scott referred to as a 'stick and rudder' pilot.

Sixteen minutes later, the windows became clear again as the last jump in the sequence completed.

"Jump series complete," Loki announced.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the 72 Herculis system," Josh said. "How far out are we from Tanna?" He inquired.

Loki pointed out the forward window, slightly left of center.

Josh looked out the window as well, spotting the pale blue-green dot that was Tanna. It was considerably larger than any of the background stars, and was increasing in size at a rapid pace. "Why are we so far out?" Josh wondered. "You couldn't jump us right into orbit?"

"First time in an unfamiliar ship," Loki explained. "Better safe than sorry."

Josh did not reply, only raising an eyebrow. He looked at the blue-green dot outside again. It was already three times larger than it was a few seconds ago, filling up half of his window. "I guess I should start decelerating, huh?"

"Probably, a good idea," Loki agreed. "Put us in orbit, and I'll plot a jump down to the surface."

“Got it,” Josh replied, as he brought their engines up to power and began to decelerate to orbital entry speed. “Where’s the pickup point?”

“Some field out in the middle of nowhere,” Loki answered.

“Why not at the spaceport?”

“She wants to avoid attracting attention to herself.”

Josh chuckled as the shuttle’s engines continued to burn, sending mild vibrations through the shuttle’s flight deck. “Yeah, I guess having your own private jump shuttle to run you to and from work every day would raise a few eyebrows.”

They continued to decelerate for several minutes, until Josh finally ended their burn, placing the shuttle in low orbit over Tanna. “In orbit,” he announced.

“Jump to the surface is plotted and locked,” Loki announced. “We’ll jump in a few hundred kilometers away, then fly in the rest of the way. That way no one in the immediate pickup area will see our jump flash.” Loki punched in some commands, calling up nav data on the screen. “Slow us down another one fifty to knock us out of orbit and put us on a descent angle.”

“Got it,” Josh replied, bringing the throttles up slightly. The shuttle vibrated again, until Josh reduced thrust thirty seconds later. “That should do it.”

Loki examined their descent angle, and then commanded the jump computer to recalculate their jump after the change in course and speed. After a few seconds, the system indicated it was ready. “Ready to jump, in three.....”

Josh pulled the nose of the shuttle up a few degrees so that they would be level in relation to the surface after they jumped.

“Two.....”

Josh swung the engine pods into a downward orientation, with a ten degree angle aft to ensure they would have some forward thrust as well as general lift.

“One.....”

“Thermal shielding online,” Josh reported after double-checking the indicators.

“Jumping.”

The windows went opaque once more, as the shuttle jumped to the surface. The ship bounced sharply, giving a violent kick to one side. Josh immediately brought all four engine pods up to full thrust to ensure adequate lift, as the sudden introduction of atmosphere against the hull of the shuttle shook its flight crew.

“Whoa!” Josh exclaimed. “This thing doesn’t jump in as smoothly as a Falcon, does it!”

“We must have jumped into some wind shear, or something,” Loki said.

“Maybe we’d better check the local weather next time,” Josh suggested. “You know, *before* we jump? You love that flight-planning crap, right?”

“Probably wouldn’t hurt,” Loki agreed, slightly embarrassed that he hadn’t thought of that himself.

Josh struggled to regain control of the shuttle as the winds bounced them about. Eventually, the outside air established a smooth flow pattern over the shuttle’s hull, and the ride was back to the normal amount of bounce one expected during atmospheric flight. Josh looked at Loki. “I think it best that we leave that part out of our post-flight report.”

“Agreed,” Loki replied sheepishly.

Abby stood next to the dilapidated barn in which her vehicle was parked, scanning the distant skies. A distant whine perked her ears. Moments later, the shuttle appeared low on the horizon, flying only a hundred meters off the surface of Tanna. It approached rapidly, more so than the Tannan shuttles that usually occupied the planet's skies. When the shuttle pitched up and slowed in an almost violent fashion before touching down smoothly on the hard-baked dirt before her, she realized who Captain Scott had assigned as her flight crew.

A few seconds later, the side hatch opened up, and a friendly face appeared. Abby smiled wide, also noticing Josh leaning across the cockpit to wave out the starboard window at her. She moved quickly to the shuttle and up the ramp, its engines idling at a low intensity.

"Need a ride, ma'am?" Loki called from the hatch as Abby ascended the steps.

"What took you so long?" she asked in jest.

"Traffic," Loki answered, smiling back at her.

* * *

"Are you sure we're in the right area?" Naralena asked as they stepped off the transit platform.

Jessica looked out across the neighborhood from the raised platform. The streets were dirty, with litter scattered about. People were sleeping in several of the more recessed doorways. A scantily-clad young woman stood on the corner not twenty meters away, flirting with every male passerby, as well as several of the females. Everywhere she looked, there were unsavory characters, and none of them appeared to be doing anything of importance. They were just watching people go about their business.

"Jesus," Jessica exclaimed. "No matter where you go in the galaxy, if there are humans, there are slums." She spotted a sign in the distance. "Is that the place?" she asked Naralena, pointing down the street to their right.

"I believe so."

"Let's get there as quickly as possible," Jessica said as she moved toward the exit. "Keep your head up, and look confident, and whatever you do, don't get sucked into conversation with anyone along the way."

Jessica moved down the stairs to the street with Naralena following close behind. Once at street level, she started down the straight in the exact fashion she had described... Head high and confident. Although she did not shy away from eye contact with anyone, she also did not seek it out. More importantly, she ignored them as much as possible, despite the occasional comments that were spoken in their direction.

A few minutes later, they found themselves at the front steps of the hotel. The building was tall, old, and appeared somewhat neglected.

"Doesn't look very inviting, does it?" Naralena said under her breath.

"No, but it does look inexpensive," Jessica replied. "Shall we?"

Jessica stepped forward, pushing the door inward and entering the lobby. Upon entering, they were met by a disturbing smell... a mixture of bodily waste and ineffective cleaning solutions. There were several people sitting in the large lobby, all of them appearing down on their luck and without anyplace else to go.

She walked up to the front desk. It was a long counter, nearly shoulder height, with bars reaching up to the ceiling,

creating a complete barrier between the customers and the man working on the opposite side.

Jessica looked at the man. He appeared no better off than the people in the lobby, or the others on the street.

“For a room you are to look, yes?” the man said in rather poor and incorrectly accented Jung.

Naralena immediately took the initiative, replying to the man in Cetian rather than Jung. “Yes, we would like a room with two beds.”

The man looked Naralena over. “By the hour, day, or week?”

“Pardon?”

“Do you want to pay by the hour, by the day, or by the week?” the man explained, appearing somewhat irritated.

Naralena looked at Jessica, whispering, “Do we want to pay by the hour, day, or week?”

Jessica smiled. “Week.”

Naralena turned to the man and spoke again in Cetian. “We would like the weekly rate.”

“Private lav, or shared?”

Jessica understood the man this time. “Definitely private.”

“Private,” Naralena responded.

“Ident Cards?”

Naralena looked at Jessica again, then replied, “They were stolen on the train ride in, I’m afraid. Are they required?”

The man rolled his eyes. “Fifty credits per week, up front.”

Naralena pulled a fifty-credit chip out of her pocket and passed it between the bars to the man.

The man passed a small, transparent, key card back to her. “Sixth floor, six two seven. One week. You don’t pay,

you get tossed at the end... no excuses. When you get new IDs, show them to me. Got it?"

"Understood," Naralena answered. "Where is the elevator?"

"It's over there," the man said, pointing to his left, "but you'd be better off taking the stairs... Trust me."

"Thank you." Naralena turned to Jessica. "Shall we?"

Five minutes later, they entered their room. Jessica walked inside and looked about. "Not as bad as I thought, considering the lobby and the neighborhood."

"Are you kidding?" Naralena wondered.

"Come on. Are you telling me this is worse than Haven?"

"Actually, yes," Naralena insisted. "Not much worse, I grant you, but worse none the less. At least on Haven we weren't paying to live there, we were paying off our debts."

Jessica went over to the view screen on the dresser and turned it on. "Crap. It's just a media box. No network terminal."

Naralena turned toward the bathroom. "I have to use the toilet."

"I guess we're going to have to steal a portable terminal from somewhere," Jessica said, "or find a way to make some money and buy one."

"I take it back," Naralena called from the bathroom. *"It's a lot worse than Haven."*

* * *

A small light flashed on the inside of his visor, followed by a repetitive beeping. Lieutenant Dorn opened his eyes, glanced about the inside of his visor, then took a deep

breath as the beeping and the flashing light stopped. Before him lay Weldon, the fourth planet in the 70 Ophiuchi system. It was an icy world, with ice caps that reached into the lower latitudes, leaving only a two-thousand-kilometer band of temperate climates around its equator.

Weldon was a small planet, only half the size of Earth, and therefore had significantly less gravity than Earth, and even less than the world on which the Ghatazhak had originally been trained. Despite its smaller size, it was home to a significant garrison of Jung soldiers, which was protected by an array of six orbital missile launchers.

During an earlier cold-coast recon of the system, Scout One had witnessed a test firing of one of the launchers. What they had discovered was a single missile that broke down into more than one hundred separate, independently maneuverable, smaller missiles, any of which could inflict significant damage to a ship in orbit. That, combined with shields that protected the base, made it an impossible target to bombard from orbit. Even with the array of laser turrets that had replaced the Aurora's original mini-rail guns, the ship would not be able to remain in firing position long enough to overpower the garrison's shields.

The task of disabling the garrison's defenses had fallen upon the Ghatazhak. With insufficient time available to hike across the frozen tundra of Weldon from a remote insertion point, a cold-coast orbital jump had been chosen as the method of insertion. It was a high-risk mission, both the execution of the jump and the completion of the mission on the surface once down... which is exactly why Lieutenant Dorn had volunteered. This was the type of mission that future generations of Ghatazhak would talk about with reverence.

The lieutenant grabbed the remote from his chest, and activated his cold jets, rotating around to look at his men behind him. One by one and without a word, each man raised his hand to confirm that he was awake and on task. He raised his own hand, spinning his finger in a circle, then holding up five fingers. He watched as his nine men fired their own cold jets and rotated until they were properly oriented, flying back first just as he was.

At a predetermined point in their mission time, the ten Ghatazhak fired their deorbit thrusters. The cold-jet thrusters continued to fire for several minutes, slowing them down just enough so that, to any Jung sensors on the ground, they might appear to be rocks that were slowing as they began to interact with the planet's thin atmosphere.

The lieutenant glanced at his jump rig's sensors. The back of his suit was beginning to heat up. Not a significant amount, and certainly no more than expected, but the temperature was rising at a steady and ever-increasing rate.

After several minutes, their deorbit thrusters' propellant was depleted. The lieutenant's jump-rig sensors showed him to be on the proper atmospheric interface trajectory. He activated the release mechanism, feeling the deorbit thruster disconnect from his back. A spray of more cold jets passing all around him confirmed that the small pack had moved away and clear of the formation. He looked back at the formation of Ghatazhak following behind him, watching as their deorbit packs also floated up and out of their way.

The lieutenant pressed another button on his remote. He felt his suit vibrate as he watched the next layer on the backs of his men unfold in spiral fashion, creating a circular, concave dish. Two small panels, one on each side, on the end of long arms, folded out from the sides of his jump rig. On the right panel was a control stick. On the left, a control

pad. The lieutenant pulled his knees upward, placing his feet against the inside of the concave dish, sliding them downward until his toes locked into rungs along the bottom side of the dish.

Lieutenant Dorn pressed a button on the left control pad, activating the atmospheric interface dish's maneuvering system. His visor became semi-opaque, and a navigation display appeared on its inner surface. He no longer cared about the view on the other side of his visor. He only cared about keeping his interface vehicle on the proper trajectory.

The display had already indicated a climbing shield temperature by the time the lieutenant had made his first minute course correction. He wondered for a moment if his men were also set and on course, but there was no way for him to know. Even though the Jung ships in orbit were well beyond the range of close-quarters comms, it was not worth the risk of detection, especially since there was nothing he could do to help them if something had gone wrong. Of course, he would know their fate in a few minutes, once they had successfully penetrated Weldon's atmosphere, jettisoned their interface dishes, and begun their free fall.

Lieutenant Dorn felt a bump against the interface dish on his back. It felt like it had been struck by a small, soft object. Then there was another, followed by a third. With the fourth bump, a small wisp of yellow-orange plasma trailed off the right side of his dish, fading away a second later. The bumps continued, becoming more frequent as well as more severe. He checked his trajectory. It was exactly as expected. Within seconds, the bumps became so frequent that he could no longer separate them. His entire body began to vibrate as he rode his interface dish, back first, down through the steadily thickening atmosphere. Fiery wisps of plasma segued into a constant wave of fire that surrounded him on

all four sides. His visor darkened further to protect his vision, as his interface dish shook violently, continuing its suicidal plunge toward the planet below.

The lieutenant ignored the shaking, the deafening rumble that reverberated through his jump rig, and the wall of fire that surrounded him. Instead, he continued to make minute adjustments to his trajectory. Not only could he see his dish's tendency to rock from side to side on his attitude display as it threatened to flip over and subject him to instant incineration, but he could feel the uneven pressures against his dish as the atmosphere of the planet came at him in uneven waves. The concentration level required was the most his service in the Ghatazhak Legions had ever demanded of him.

For a moment, he thought he saw a flash of light behind him, like a sudden surge in his own plasma trail, but there had been no preceding bump felt against his back. He dismissed the event from his mind, preferring to keep his energies focused on the task at hand. In another minute, his speed would have been reduced enough by atmospheric friction that the fires would disappear, and he could abandon his dish and begin his free fall.

Fifty seconds left...

Another flash of light, this one to the opposite side of him, yet still extremely close by.

Forty seconds left...

Warnings flashed in his visor, alerting him that his own attitude thrusters were no longer powerful enough to counteract the forces of the thickening atmosphere. If his dish wanted to flip over and kill him, there was nothing he could do about it.

Thirty seconds...

At least his death would be instantaneous.

Another flash of light... Slightly left and much further away than before.

Twenty seconds...

The violent shaking was beginning to lessen, and the swaying motion of the disk was lessening as well.

Ten seconds...

The wall of fiery plasma that surrounded him began to fade.

Five seconds...

He looked behind him, as his visor returned to normal, and the plasma wall around him began to dissipate. There were no longer nine Ghatazhak following him. There were only six.

Zero.

The control arms for the lieutenant's interface dish retracted to his sides, as did the dish itself moments after. As the dish collapsed, he felt the resistance to the atmosphere lessen somewhat. He pushed his right arm and leg out slightly as he arched his back, using the drag to roll himself over to face downward, in the direction of descent. He glanced at the countdown timer in his visor. Thirty seconds to release. Although he could not see them, he knew that the surviving members of his team were now maneuvering themselves away from one another for safety.

Thirty seconds passed, and the lieutenant felt a tug at his back as a small drogue chute opened and deployed. Although it did slow his descent somewhat, its main purpose was to pull his atmospheric interface dish away from him. Once unencumbered by the bulky apparatus, his remaining series of chutes would be free to operate.

Then it began... A series of drogue chutes, each one larger than the next. They deployed, slowed the lieutenant down a degree, then automatically detached, followed by

the next chute in the series, eventually decelerating the lieutenant and his team down to acceptable speeds.

The lieutenant stared into the darkness below him as he rode the stream of drogue chutes downward. The patchy snow thousands of kilometers below glistened a surprising array of colors due to the light reflected off Weldon's many nearby moons. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, his main chute deployed.

As they descended gracefully through the last few hundred meters, the lieutenant visually scanned the immediate area. As expected, there was no one in sight, as their chosen landing site was at least a five-day hike from their targets.

A minute later, the lieutenant flared his parachute and touched down, ending in a crouch with his rifle held high at the ready. He braced himself as his parachute retracted into the hard-pack on his back. The other pieces of his rig, the ones that had detached from him during his descent sequence, would ignite and disintegrate during their own descents, leaving very little to reach the surface.

Minutes later, his men gathered around him, each of them carrying the last section of their jump rig over their shoulder. The lieutenant dropped his chute pack on the ground in front of him, as did his surviving soldiers. He looked at their faces. Each of them appeared as mentally drained as he felt. Yet, he knew that they were ready to move out. "Seven," he said. "It will have to do," he added as he pulled out his cold-fire disposal tube. He cracked it open and poured the powder over his pack, then activated the container and dropped it onto the pack as well. The powder began to smoke, engulfing the pack in blue-gray smoke. His men did the same, sending broken clouds of smoke into the night sky. If anyone was near enough to see the smoke, and

chose to investigate, there would be nothing left but stained ground when they arrived.

The lieutenant checked his visor for a direction. "We'll head that way for now. There is a river about twenty kilometers distant. We can rest there before moving on."

CHAPTER FIVE

Suvan Navarro stepped out of the elevator and found himself facing a long corridor. On either side were doors to the various high-end suites on the top level of the Hotel Dyason on the resort island of Carabo. Although he had stayed at this hotel many times in his life, he had never stayed in the penthouse level. Not that he could not afford to. His family was one of the oldest noble families of Takara, one of the original six houses that had settled this world more than five centuries ago. As one of the original six houses of Takara, his family held control of the last remaining capital ship, the Avendahl, which he had commanded for the last eight years.

Suvan was not a man to spend frivolously. His family had gained their fortune through careful investments over long periods of time. The only reason he had come to Carabo had been at the request of his wife, whom he had not seen for several months. Even then, had the Avendahl not been in port for resupply, he might not have come.

Yet, here he was, walking down the corridor to a penthouse suite, an upgrade his wife had no doubt wrangled on her arrival earlier in the day. Whatever Tylia Navarro wanted, Tylia Navarro got. He had learned that the hard way. It was why he had left his uniforms on board the Avendahl, as she despised the military, especially under the empire of Caius. For years she had begged him to pass command to his cousin, Ulias Navarro, and to retire, but Suvan had refused, not trusting the inexperienced younger officer with such responsibility. He had no doubt that this weekend she

would again attempt to convince him to end his military service, which meant it would be a difficult couple of days for them both, and in the end, he would still be returning to his ship.

Suvan placed his hand on the lock panel on the wall next to the door at the end of the corridor. A green light flashed, and the door slid open. He entered the foyer, which was dimly lit. He moved forward toward the living room, laying his coat on a side chair as he walked toward the floor-to-ceiling windows on the opposite side of the room. He could smell his wife's perfume in the air as he approached the window.

He stood at the window, gazing at the sunset over the crimson water below. He heard movement in the next room. As much as he and his wife found themselves at odds, he still enjoyed her company. He even found the long separations that his command required of him made their shared time even more enjoyable. He tried to block the suspicion that the weekend would eventually descend into bitter arguments, choosing to enjoy what time they had until then.

"Your wife will return shortly," a male voice called from the shadows.

Suvan turned slowly so as not to appear ill at ease. The voice was older, and well spoken. A man of obvious breeding and intelligence. This man had somehow managed to arrange this meeting, either with or without the help of Suvan's wife.

"I asked her to give us a moment alone, so that we might discuss some issues of mutual interest."

Suvan finished turning around, turning to face the direction of the voice. On the far side of the room, back

behind the wet bar, a man stood in the dim light, his face still in shadows.

"I trust you have come alone?" the voice inquired.

Suvan smiled, recognizing the voice. "Yes, Casimir, I am alone."

Casimir picked up two drinks and stepped out from behind the bar and into the light. "I respect a man who does not feel the need to bend to outdated protocols and concepts."

"If you are referring to my not using your title, it is not because I do not feel the need to respect tradition," Suvan explained. "It is because you chose not to accept your rightful position as leader of Takara. Instead, you handed power over to the nobles. Technically, that means you are neither a prince nor a king, but rather, a noble, the same as I."

"Quite correct," Casimir agreed, handing a drink to Suvan. "I apologize for the clandestine nature of this meeting. I'm sure you can understand the need to keep this discussion out of the public view."

"It is not the public from which you wish to conceal this meeting," Suvan commented.

"Quite right. I'm afraid that knowledge of this meeting by itself could have serious repercussions."

Suvan sipped his drink. "That would be an understatement of considerable magnitude."

Casimir also sipped at his drink as he moved over to the window to enjoy the view. "Do not be angry with Tylia; she had no prior knowledge of my intentions. Whatever her reasons were for asking you here were her own."

"Then how did you know I would be here?" Captain Navarro wondered.

"I have many sources," Casimir explained.

“As do all the houses of Takara.”

“True enough. However, I left the Takar system two days ago for Corinair. All records show me still on that world. My people arranged to have you upgraded to this suite because all of its windows face the storm side. No boats can safely sail those waters. Not with that swell. Hence, no one can see into this room, or eavesdrop on our conversation.”

Suvan Navarro sat down in one of the overstuffed chairs facing the window and Casimir. “I take it you are hoping to secure my loyalty?”

Casimir smiled. “I served with your father, you know. On Palee. We trained together. He was an amazing pilot and a gifted tactician. Whatever became of him?”

“He went on to command the Kittabor,” Suvan explained. “He was killed at the Battle of Augamenta, when the Karuzari ambushed the ship with a wave of suicide ships armed with nuclear weapons.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” Casimir replied. “Augamenta was after I had retired as leader of the Karuzari. They had become fanatical in their ways... Willing to kill indiscriminately, swearing that the ends justified the means. Perhaps, if I had stayed...”

“It is ancient history,” Suvan interrupted. “Although I do appreciate your sentiments. The fact is, my father chose his life, just as I choose mine. When one chooses to serve on a ship of war, one cannot complain when that service calls for the ultimate sacrifice.”

“A logical point of view,” Casimir agreed. “Somewhat harsh, I think, but logical nonetheless.”

“Perhaps it would be best if you got to the point of your visit, Casimir. I’m sure my wife is dying to know what you wanted to talk to me about.”

“Actually, I lied. Your wife went to the spa. Another ‘arrangement’ by my people. She does not even know I am here.”

“That would make more sense.”

“A change is coming, Suvan,” Casimir explained. “The nobles are forcing it upon us. The day will soon come when each man will have to decide where his loyalties lie, with his house, or with his people.”

“Must they be mutually exclusive?” Suvan wondered. “In a perfect world, one should be able to serve the needs of both. At least, that is how Takaran society was intended to function.”

“Ah, yes, but ours is not a perfect world,” Casimir replied. “Ours is a world filled with human imperfections. Lust, greed, envy, desire. At times they drive us to greatness, at other times to terrible evil. We are the only creatures in the galaxy that can convince ourselves that the sky is green simply because we need it to be, despite the fact that it is, and always has been, blue.” Casimir sighed as he moved to the chair next to Suvan. “Takaran society has become corrupted by the same noble families that sought to protect it. My brother committed such acts, twisted things up so badly, that I doubt it can ever be corrected. His most clever act was that he made all the houses even richer and more powerful than ever before, thus ensuring their loyalty for as long as the wealth and the anti-aging serum flowed. Now that the serum is no longer, the nobles seek to rally their fortunes with even greater zeal than before, as if more wealth will give them longer life. It is insane.”

“Perhaps, but it is what it is. You, more than anyone, must know that it cannot be corrected, at least not without great sacrifice.”

"Great sacrifice," Casimir repeated solemnly. "I had so hoped to avoid such sacrifice. I have already seen so much needless death and destruction... more than any man should witness in a hundred lifetimes."

"Am I correct to assume that you have not yet convinced the nobles to support the Alliance in the Sol sector?" Navarro asked.

"I cannot get them to commit one way or the other," Casimir voiced in frustration. "They push me to the breaking point, then voice disfavor when I legally end run them to achieve my goals."

"I see."

"I fear that I can only do so for a limited time," Casimir explained. "Eventually, the nobles will be forced to take a position either for, or against supporting the Alliance. However, I may have no alternative but to force their hand sooner than they would like."

"And what is it that you require of me?" Captain Navarro asked, one eyebrow raised slightly higher than the other.

"We have only a handful of warships left, each of them owned by a different house. Of them, the Avendahl is by far the most powerful, more so than all the other ships of Takara combined. Were you to support me..."

"The Avendahl cannot protect House Ta'Akar," Suvan warned, "not completely. It can prevent orbital attack from other ships, but your home, your family, they will still be vulnerable. Force is not the only way to declaw a noble name. And my house is not the most affluent, not by any measure."

"But one."

Suvan nodded agreement. "But one." Captain Navarro took a deep breath and sighed. "As distasteful as it may be,

as a son of House Navarro, I would be remiss if I were not to inquire about the benefit of such support."

"Honor?"

"To men such as us, that would normally be enough," Suvan agreed. "However, in such times, one must ensure one's own strength, even financially, if one is to continue to set an honorable example for others to follow."

"Indeed," Casimir agreed. "The flow of propellant from the 72 Herculis system in the Sol sector should be more than enough to protect both our houses against financial instability, should events sour."

"The introduction of this propellant into the marketplace of the Pentaurus cluster has already raised considerable protest among the nobles," Suvan warned.

"The propellant thus far has been but a trickle," Casimir dismissed with a wave of his hand. "Enough to cause them to consider their position more carefully."

"So then, you have the ability, should you choose, to cripple the market and bring the nobles to their knees, financially speaking. Then why not do so?"

Casimir leaned back in his chair, setting his empty glass down on the side table. "I tire of this game. It was never one that I enjoyed to begin with. Perhaps I should put this another way, Captain. The Avendahl may be owned by House Navarro, but her crew is not. They must be paid for their services, just as the resources needed to feed them, and to run your ship, must also be paid for. Your family does not have the financial resources to fund the operation of that ship for more than a few weeks at best. Once those funds run dry, the Avendahl becomes a threat to no one. A useless hulk of metal that is of value only as scrap."

"Such support can come from other houses just as easily," Captain Navarro stated confidently. "There will

always be someone willing to pay to have such a ship at their disposal.”

“Of all the noble houses of Takara, there are but a handful that can afford such services,” Casimir pointed out, “even fewer still once propellant from the Sol sector begins to flow more freely.”

“Such an overabundance of product would hurt everyone’s accounts,” Suvan warned, “including that of the seller.”

Casimir stood, straightening his coat. “Then it appears, my good captain, that you have a choice to make.” He moved toward the exit, pausing halfway across the room to turn back toward Suvan. “I apologize for the deception, Suvan. I trust you will keep our discussion private.”

“Of course.”

Casimir nodded politely as a show of appreciation and respect, then turned and continued toward the door.

“Casimir,” the captain called.

Casimir stopped in his tracks, turning back toward the captain once more.

“Just because we do not live in a perfect world, it does not mean that we are excused from behaving as if we were.”

Casimir smiled, nodded again, and then departed without another word.

Suvan Navarro sat in his chair, staring out the big windows at the Takaran sun as it disappeared behind the cresting waves in the distance.

The future is going to be interesting, he thought.

* * *

The elderly gentleman drove his vehicle down the streets of Cetia, just as he always did at the end of each and every work week. He circled the same paths over and over, only occasionally wandering onto side streets. It seemed to him that the selections were becoming less appealing with each passing week. He had toyed with the idea of taking his business to more reputable providers. After all, he certainly could afford their higher rates. However, he preferred the anonymity that came with the 'independents'—as they were commonly referred to—who worked the streets of the less favorable neighborhoods. There was just something about them...

Yet another lap revealed no new providers. The hour was getting late, and if he did not initiate a transaction soon, he would be forced to abandon his efforts and head home for the weekend. Home to his wife and children. Home to the chores and drudgery that was his life. This night was the only night he had available, as his pattern of working late in order to ensure the entire weekend off had been established, and verified by his wife, many years ago.

He checked his watch again as he turned the corner to begin his last circuit. If he was lucky, someone he had not yet seen would have finished her last transaction and returned to solicit another since his last lap. He continued down the main boulevard, continuing until he was well beyond the normal area of activity. He turned around at the next intersection and headed back in the opposite direction, not wanting to take the additional time to loop around the parallel block, where only the less appealing independents seemed to linger.

Unfortunately, luck was not with him. He reached the end of the boulevard without spotting anyone worth contacting. He considered traveling further, beyond the

normal areas worked by independents on the off chance that someone new, someone less knowledgeable might solicit, but again his time was becoming short. Even if he did find someone new out on the fringe, there would not be enough time to complete the transaction without raising undue suspicion on the part of his wife.

The old man sighed and turned the corner to the right, heading back toward the expressway. Then, on the next corner, he saw something that caught him by surprise. Someone new.

She was not on the main route, which in his mind was a sign that she was new to the trade. Such providers made for interesting transactions, as they were not yet jaded and, at least in his mind, still appeared to enjoy their work.

She was standing partly in the shadows, yet bathed in sufficient light as to showcase her exquisite form. She was not too young... maybe early to mid-twenties, and she appeared quite fit, with long, dark hair that cascaded across her shoulders. She was wearing a pair of black shorts that had been cut incredibly short, and a black T-shirt that had been cut away so high that he could almost make out the underside of her breasts.

His first thought was to circle around at least once or twice to make sure she was not just some young lady innocently waiting for a friend. That had happened to him on more than one occasion, and such misunderstandings were never pleasant. However, something made him stop... and stare. Perhaps it was disbelief, or perhaps he really was just a lecherous old man. More likely, he did not want to run the risk that someone else would initiate a transaction with this lovely young woman while he was driving around the block, racked with indecision.

"Hi, there," the young lady said in Jung.

The old man found her accent odd, but her smile warm and inviting. "Good evening," he responded in the same language.

"Are you looking for some company?" the young woman asked, her smile even more beckoning than before.

"An interesting idea," the old man replied, in as non-committal a fashion as possible. "Perhaps we can discuss it further?" He reached over and opened the passenger door on his vehicle. "Interested?"

The young woman bent over at the waist, peering into the old man's car, searching the interior with her eyes. She smiled again. "Why not?" she answered.

The old man found her response odd. She sat down in the passenger seat and closed her door. "To the corner and around, two blocks. Hotel Barto, on right."

The old man pulled away from the curb and turned the corner as instructed. "My name is Glaudar."

"Lylah," the young lady answered. "Nice to meet you, Glaudar."

"I have not seen you out here before," Glaudar said.

"I am new to the area," Lylah explained. "I have been here but to only days of a few."

Glaudar looked at her with some suspicion. "No offense," he said, switching to Cetian, "but your Jung is horrible."

Lylah looked relieved. "Some of the other girls told me to always start off in Jung, but I don't have much experience in the language."

Even in Cetian, her syntax was odd. "You are not from Cetia, are you?" Glaudar wondered.

"No, I am from a village in the hills," Lylah explained. "Here," she added, pointing at the hotel.

Glaudar pulled his car into the lot and parked. He looked around outside as the young lady opened her door and

exited his vehicle. She walked around the front, then stopped to look at him.

"You are coming?" she asked with that same curious smile.

The old man smiled and opened his door. He half expected to be attacked by the young woman's accomplices, she was that much more attractive than the other providers he usually hired. However, there was no one else about.

He stepped out of his vehicle and followed Lylah from a distance, admiring her assets from behind. He waited at a distance as she went to the window and passed a credit chip to the man on the other side, receiving a room key card in return. She turned back toward him, waving the key card in the air in seductive fashion, signaling Glaudar to follow her.

Glaudar followed Lylah through the lobby and up the stairs. This hotel was no different than any of the others in which he had conducted transactions. Always dimly lit, and always in dire need of a substantial cleaning.

Lylah passed the key card over the door lock. The lock clicked and opened slightly, allowing her to push the door inward and step inside the room. She passed her hand over the light controls on the wall as she entered the room. The lights came up to a warm, romantic glow. The young woman might be new to the area, but she was not new to her trade, of that Glaudar was certain.

Glaudar entered the room somewhat tentatively, looking about suspiciously, still finding his good fortune hard to believe. However, here he was, alone in a seedy hotel room, with a beautiful young woman with whom he was about to become intimate.

"Please to be comfortable," Lylah said in her odd, lyrical style of Cetian.

Glaudar sat on the edge of the bed, his eyes fixed on Lylah. "How much is this going to cost me?" he wondered.

"How much have you?"

Glaudar smiled. "More than enough."

Lylah smiled seductively. "Five hundred credits," she told him confidently.

"Five?" Glaudar smiled again, this time with one eyebrow rising. "I have never paid more than three."

"Then you have been the buyer of inferior products," she replied.

"How do I know that you will be worth so much?"

Lylah smiled, licked her lips, then pulled her top up over her head, revealing her naked breasts and tossing her skimpy blouse aside on the floor.

Glaudar suddenly forgot about his time constraints, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a five-hundred credit chip. "There is more available, if warranted," he told her, barely able to hide his eagerness.

Lylah took the credit chip from Glaudar and put it into the pocket of her shorts. "That was a mistake," she told him in yet another language.

Glaudar looked confused. She was now speaking a language that no one had spoken on Kohara for as long as he could remember.

"Hand it over," she told him as she picked up her top and put it back on. She looked at him, noticing that he was not moving. "Your credits, dumbass. Give them to me."

"I meant them as an incentive," he explained, "so that you would..."

"I know what you meant, pops," Lylah interrupted.

"Then..." Glaudar's eyes suddenly widened.

"That's right, fella, I'm stealing your credits... all of them."

Glaudar looked at her. She had an unusual expression on her face. She no longer looked sexy and seductive. Instead, she now carried a far more determined look, a certain toughness that was wholly unfamiliar to him.

“And if I do not?”

Lylah shook her head in disbelief. “Then I beat the shit out of you and take it anyway.”

Glaudar took offense. “I may be an old man, but I am more than twice your size...”

“Just shut up and hand it over,” she insisted.

Glaudar immediately jumped to his feet, swinging at her with his closed right fist. She stepped backward, her left hand reaching up and blocking the old man’s swing. Her right hand punched him hard in the gut, then she knuckle-punched him in the throat. Glaudar fell backward onto the bed, gasping for air and clutching at his throat, a panicked look in his eyes.

Lylah moved around the bed and sat down beside the old man as he wheezed with each labored inhalation. “I warned you,” she told him as she reached into his pocket and removed all of his remaining credits. She rolled him over slightly and pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. She pulled out his ID and placed it on the bed next to the credit chips. She looked at him again. “Don’t worry, you’ll be able to breathe normally soon.” She picked up his ID and looked at it. “Glaudar Sandall. Are you married, Mister Sandall?”

Glaudar nodded, still unable to speak.

“Kids?”

Again he nodded.

“You really should be ashamed of yourself, Glaudar,” she continued. “Let me tell you how this works. I’m going to take all your credits, as well as your ID here, and I’m going to go about my merry way. I know, it sucks,” she sympathized,

“but trust me, I need these credits more than you do. Hell, in a few weeks, you’ll be thanking me. Well, you would if you were able to connect the dots, but...”

Lylah turned to look in his eyes, switching back to the Cetian language. “Consider yourself lucky, for I have killed many, all of them stronger than you. I will leave, you will stay. Later, you will go home. You will tell no one what happened here this night. If you do, I will find you, and I will kill you. Do you understand?”

Glaudar nodded in the affirmative, a look of terror in his eyes.

“Honestly, I’m not a bad person,” Lylah said, switching back to her third language as she rose and gathered her things to leave. “Who knows, maybe someday, after this is all over, I’ll look you up and we can have a big laugh over all of this.” She turned back to look at him. “Then again, maybe not.” She moved to the door, then called back in Cetian, “May your evening go better than this.” Then she left, leaving Glaudar lying on the bed, struggling to regain his breath, thoroughly confused, and wishing he were home.

The door to their hotel room swung open, startling Naralena. Jessica walked confidently into the room. As she crossed to the dresser, she reached into her pocket and pulled out two five-hundred credit chips and several one-hundred credit ones. “I told you it would work,” she said as she tossed the credit chips onto the bed in front of Naralena.

Naralena looked at the chips in disbelief, taking a quick tally of their new funds. “There’s got to be at least thirteen hundred credits here,” she exclaimed. “How many guys did you, what did you call it...?”

"Roll?"

"Yes, roll."

"I only had to roll one," she said as she headed for the bathroom. "The right one."

* * *

Suvan Navarro stood on the balcony of his hotel room, looking out over the waters surrounding the island resort. The waves, now calmer at this late hour, glistened in the moonlight. He much preferred this season, when only one of Takara's three moons was visible in the night sky. The single shadows its moonlight cast on his homeworld were far more dramatic, and far easier to understand. When there were three moons overhead, everything washed out, appearing almost two-dimensional. It was hard to distinguish any detail under such conditions.

Takaran politics seemed much the same way. Caius might have been a maniacal ruler, but he had been a single point of control that brought prosperity to Takara, and had grown the count of noble houses to many times what they had been prior to his reign.

But at what price?

Suvan's train of thought was broken by the sound of the door sliding open behind him, and the rustling of his wife's robes in the late-night breeze.

"Suvan?" his wife queried as she stepped out onto the balcony. "What are you doing out here in the cold?"

"I did not mean to wake you," he said, looking back at her over his shoulder. "I could not sleep."

"You never could, after being away for so long," she reminded him. "The low rumble of the ship, remember?"

"Ah, yes," Suvan replied. "You become so accustomed to it, you do not realize it is even there, until it is not."

Tylia Navarro looked at her husband's expression. Their time together had been minimal since he took command of the Avendahl, but she could still read his moods, and this one was pensive; troubled. "There is something bothering you, isn't there? What is it?"

"It is not important."

"It is important enough to keep you up at night. Perhaps if you share it..."

"Then we can both lie awake till dawn?" Suvan replied.

"Suvan..."

Suvan sighed. He looked out at the water again, as his wife moved to the balcony rail to stand beside him. "What do you think of Casimir Ta'Akar?" he asked.

"Good intentions, but somewhat naive... at least when it comes to Takara. He has been away too long, and he has aged more than most. He has lost touch with Takara."

"Then you do not believe he made the right decision... turning power over to Parliament?"

"It may have been the right decision, but it was the wrong time," Tylia said. "Takara needs a strong leader right now, one that will guide its recovery, at least until it can guide itself."

"And the Alliance?"

"It got Casimir what he wanted... to overthrow the empire and unseat his brother. Aside from that, I see no continued value in membership."

Suvan looked surprised. "What about the Data Ark?"

"What could possibly be in there that would be of benefit to us?" she wondered. "Anything found there would be a thousand years old. Surely we are far more advanced than anything contained within those files."

"I have heard rumors to the contrary," Suvan told her.

"And I have heard rumors that Caius is not really dead, that he escaped and is in hiding. Then there is the one about the old man living on the dark side of Yonblatt." Tylia smiled. "Shall I go on?"

"Does there always have to be a benefit... a reward for doing the right thing?" Suvan wondered.

"Suvan, I know you are enamored of the Alliance and its war to defeat the Jung. Nothing would please you more than to pit the might of the Avendahl against such adversaries. You long for the same glory as your father, and his father before him."

"Is there anything wrong with that?"

"Other than dying?" Tylia exclaimed. "Why all this? Why now? What has happened?"

"Nothing," Suvan assured her, "but soon, I may be forced to make some difficult decisions... ones that, if incorrect, could bring great disfavor to our house, possibly even ruin."

"Then choose wisely, my husband."

"Easy to say, my wife, but I am afraid that there is no clear answer."

"Then you must make the only choice a truly noble man can make," she told him. "You must do what *you*, Captain Suvan Navarro, believe to be right."

"Even if it means doing something terribly wrong?"

"Better to do the wrong thing for the right reasons, is it not?" She pulled her robes tighter around her body as the breeze picked up. "It's too cold out here. Come to bed, Suvan."

"Soon," he promised. "Soon." He watched over his shoulder as she slipped back into the bedroom, closing the sliding glass door behind her. Again his gaze returned to the

waters below. *The wrong thing for the right reasons*, he thought. It was part of a very old saying whose origins were unknown to him. He had never much liked it, as it had always seemed like an excuse, or a way to justify one's actions, even when they were incorrect, and it helped little with the problem at hand. *What is the 'right' thing to do?*

* * *

Senior Commander Levinar stepped onto the deck of the command and control center to begin his shift as commander of the watch. As usual, a mug of spiced Mavaran tea was waiting for him at his station on the central command platform. He took his seat and picked up his mug, sipping carefully as he slowly rotated in his chair. One step below him was a ring of senior controllers, each of them monitoring the various departments of the massive battle platform. Walking behind them and peering over their shoulders, were his two primary control officers, whose duty it was to pass information onto him, and then give the appropriate instructions to the various senior controllers based on his orders. It was a convoluted process, but a necessary one, considering the size and complexity of the Ton-Wanori.

On the level below, beyond the ring of senior controllers that surrounded him, was the main floor. Also organized in a circular fashion, it was filled with dozens of secondary controllers and technicians who were tasked with the monitoring and operations of the thousands of systems that made up the platform. It was just as the platform's commander, Admiral Dugnaro, had always insisted. 'A battle platform is more city than warship. It is just a well-armed city... one that can be relocated when necessary.' It was

because of this that the senior commander had applied for transfer on more than one occasion. He longed for more conventional duty, aboard true ships of war, not mobile spaceports. Unfortunately, transfer was difficult to obtain. Officer positions within the fleet rarely opened up, due to the fact that actual armed conflict was rare. The Jung had nearly completed conquering the entire sector, meaning there were very few adversaries remaining. If the senior commander wanted a command of his own, he needed to see actual combat. That meant a transfer to one of the ships heading out beyond such stations as Tanna, Ulysses, or Warank. The only combat anticipated within the core was in the Sol system, and by now, he expected that it too was completely conquered by the Jung.

Senior Commander Levinar sipped his tea again as he contemplated another boring shift of routine problems and solutions, as well as a few battle drills thrown in to meet minimum ongoing training requirements. Such was his life, and at times he felt guilty for complaining. Within a few years, he would be able to establish a residence on Pylius, and his wife and children would be able to join him. Such luxuries would not be available on a ship in the frontier.

Still, he couldn't help but dream...

A rumble of words, urgent in their tone, washed up from the lower levels, interrupting the senior commander's train of thought. He looked at his primary control officers, who seemed tense. He glanced up at the major systems status displays on the ring of view screens around him, noticing that the platform was automatically raising its shields and coming to alert status. "Report!" he barked, unwilling to wait the few seconds that it took for the senior controller to assess the situation and pass it up the chain of command.

"Sir! The Jar-Alatt..." The senior controller turned to look at his commander, just as one of the overhead view screens changed to show the ship in question. The senior commander's mouth fell open at the sight of the battleship. It was engulfed in a massive collection of secondary explosions from within its hull. Debris was hurtling outward from its underside. The ship was destroyed.

Alarms filled the control center as the ship came to alert status, the call having been appropriately made by one of the controllers on the main floor below.

"...She has been destroyed," the senior controller finished in disbelief.

"By whom?" the senior commander demanded to know. Another glance about the overhead view screens told him that the platform was indeed coming alive in preparation for battle. Shield status screens were changing from red to green as their shields began to charge. Weapons status screens flickered to life as gun crews and automated defenses powered up and became ready for action.

"Unknown," the senior controller replied. "We have no contacts in the... Wait!"

Senior Commander looked up at the central overhead view screen, the one that had revealed the fate of the Jar-Alatt only seconds ago. Now it displayed one of the Pylus fleet's cruisers, the Ontareen. It was turning hard as at least a half dozen red-orange balls of energy slammed into its starboard side, tearing it apart. Another ship, one that he did not recognize, passed quickly from left to right in the foreground. "What was that? A ship? Tracking!"

The view screen to the right switched images, revealing the aft end of the unknown ship as it flew past the doomed cruiser. Before he could get a good look at the enemy

vessel, it disappeared in a flash of blue-white light. "What the..."

The command platform shook violently, knocking the standing senior commander off his feet.

"Impact!" the other senior controller exclaimed. "Number four arm!"

"We're losing the arm!" the first senior controller added.

Senior Commander Levinar struggled to get back on his feet, as the entire platform was rocked by a series of secondary explosions. Several view screens fell from the overhead ring, smashing into both controllers and consoles. The shaking sent one of his senior controllers tumbling over the rail, falling to the deck below. Alarms filled the air, drowning out the voices of his men as they tried in vain to understand and report the events... to make sense out of the sudden and complete chaos that threatened to overwhelm them. Sparks flew in all directions, and the smoke began to billow up from below.

As Senior Commander Levinar tried to return to his command chair, the platform again shook, this time sliding sharply to one side, moving out from under the senior commander's feet. He felt a sharp pain in his back as he slammed into the railing behind him. He toppled over the railing, but instead of falling to the deck below, he suddenly felt himself floating, tumbling head over feet, the sound of tearing metal and exploding electronics filling his ears. As he tumbled, he caught sight of an overhead bulkhead tearing away. Then another impact. His head. His vision blackened, and just before he lost consciousness, he felt a tremendous wave of heat engulf him.

The cockpit shook as it sped away from the Ton-Wanori.

"We're not going to make it!" the voice of a fellow pilot cried out over the fighter's communications system.

"Maintain full power!" the pilot ordered the others in his squadron as they attempted to outrun the spreading wave of burning gases, debris and radiation. That wave had been their home only moments ago, and now it was chasing them across space, trying to kill them.

"I'm hit..." another voice cried out as its transmission was cut short.

The pilot remained pushed back in his seat as his fighter continued to accelerate straight toward the planet Pylus below. He dared not turn away for fear that any change in course would allow the spreading wave to catch him and tear his tiny ship apart. Only a minute ago, he and his men had been responding to an action alert, expecting to jet off into space and engage whomever had been foolish enough to attack a Jung battle group. Now they were running for their lives.

A wall of burning gases threatened to engulf his ship from either side as it made a mad dash for safety. Large chunks of debris went flying past him, traveling at far greater velocities than he was able to achieve in such short order. He could feel his ship straining to accelerate. His systems danced about, flickering and offering wildly erratic readings as the radiation wreaked havoc with his ship's electronics. All manner of thoughts ran through the pilot's mind. An attack? A super-weapon of some sort? No, nothing like that could take out a battle platform. Not like this. It had to be a catastrophic failure of all of the platform's antimatter reactors... if that was even possible.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, the Jung fighter managed to get clear of the explosion. His flight instruments

began to settle down and give him accurate readings. He was heading directly toward Pylius. "All ships, pull up!"

"But the debris!"

"Pull up!" the pilot repeated as he pitched up to avoid burning up in a straight-in interface with the planet's atmosphere. His engines roared as he brought his ship level with the planet's horizon. Fragments of the battle platform, both big and small, went streaking past him on either side, taking on an eerie orange glow as they dove into the thickening atmosphere below and eventually burned up altogether.

"How many got out?" the pilot queried over the communications systems. "Sound off!"

"Two seven two!" a voice replied.

"One five eight!" another chimed in.

"One one zero."

"Two two five."

"Contacts!" another voice interrupted. *"Two ships! Enemy fighters, I think! On my tail! Four kilometers out! They came out of no..."* The transmission suddenly went dead.

"Who was that?" the pilot asked.

"I think it was Merrill in two four two!" another voice replied. *"He was behind me a..."* The response also went dead.

"I've got them too!" another pilot announced. *"Position three five point... Wait! They're gone! What the hell?"*

"This has got to be an attack of some sort!" the pilot declared. "All fighters join up on me at position three five point two seven five; alpha two one seven."

"Contacts!" a voice the pilot recognized as the pilot of Two two five. *"Dead ahead, five kilometers. Position three seven point two two five; alpha two two zero!"*

The pilot pitched his ship further up and banked to his right. *"I'm turning in now!"* he announced. *"Anyone near me join up!"*

"They're fi..." the pilot of two two five tried to report.

"Damn it!" the pilot yelled in frustration. "Who are these guys?"

"They just appeared out of nowhere, in flashes of blue-white light!" one of the other pilots reported.

Another pilot screamed in agony as his ship was torn apart.

The pilot finished his turn and looked about. He could see several explosions in the distance, as well as several flashes of blue-white light, but they were too far away. He wasn't picking up any enemy contacts on his screen, but there was something else wrong. He also wasn't picking up the Jar-Alatt, which should have been in orbit only a few hundred kilometers away.

His threat sensors suddenly lit up, warning him of two enemy contacts directly behind him. They too had come out of nowhere. One moment his screen had been clear, the next there had been two bandits directly behind him and closing fast.

The fighter shook violently as weapons fire tore through its hull. Warning lights began illuminating all over his console. Something exploded deep within his ship, far behind him, causing the ship to yaw to starboard in a sharp, jarring motion. His helmet slammed into the side of the canopy, his arms flailing. Another explosion; this time in his port wing as one of his propellant tanks ignited. He instinctively reached down with both hands, grabbing the ejection levers on either side of his seat and pulling them up sharply and in unison. Explosive charges went off all around his canopy, sending the bubble shooting up and back, away

from the ship as it continued its slow, lateral spin. There was a deep rumble in his seat. Smoke and flames shot up all around him. He shot upward, out of the cockpit and into open space as the fighter broke apart. As he looked down upon his exploding fighter, two unfamiliar ships, like flying wings, passed under him at considerable speed, disappearing in flashes of blue-white light seconds later.

The boosters on his ejection seat burned for nearly a minute, its automated attitude thrusters steering him in a direction away from the planet in order to give him as much time as possible before the planet's gravity claimed his life. Eventually, its limited propellant supply was consumed and it shut down, leaving him floating in orbit above Pylius. He was in a slow, rotation around the seat's vertical axis. As he came around, he saw the remains of both the Ton-Wanori and the Jar-Alatt. He also saw more blue-white flashes of light, some small, some bigger, and one considerably larger still, as they entered the battle and then promptly departed. He could see more distant explosions over the planet, ones so large they had to be either frigate or even cruisers. The Jung fleet, his fleet, was being taken apart with ease. It seemed unfathomable. In fact, had he not witnessed it himself, he would not believe it possible.

Who are they?

General Larotte's eyes danced from screen to screen as he assessed the tactical situation. Unknown attackers clad in flat black body armor were attacking his garrison from all sides. It was a hopeless cause, of that he was sure, as there was no way that fifty men, no matter how skilled, could penetrate his defenses.

What intrigued him was their tactics. The attackers were carefully positioned, staying behind cover as much as possible, only exposing themselves long enough to take shots at his men on the walls and in the towers. And each shot they took found its mark... perfectly. It was a losing tactic, as he had more than a thousand men within his walls. Were they trying to draw his men out into the open? Had they rigged some type of trap that would destroy his men by the hundreds once they stepped beyond the garrison's walls? Thus far, not a single kill had been reported by his forces, yet he had lost only fifteen of his own men to the enemy.

"Have you had any luck raising the Ton-Wanori?" the general asked his communications officer.

"Negative, General. I have not been able to raise anyone. Not ships in orbit, not the air-defense towers, not the air base at Galinda."

"Have our communications been taken out?"

"No, sir. I show all systems as operational. I can even verify the main towers at Faraday are still operating. No one is answering."

The general turned his attention back to the view screens, as the meaningless exchange of weapons fire continued. "I've seen war games with greater losses than this!" he exclaimed.

Out of the corner of his eye, on one of the screens to his left, the general noticed something. He turned his attention to the left-most screen. "There," he said, pointing to the screen. "Magnify that feed. Where is that?"

"Tower five, General."

"Pan to the right, slowly," the general ordered.

On the view screen he could see inhabitants of the neighborhood that surrounded the garrison evacuating the

immediate area. "They're evacuating the locals!" he realized. He turned back to the communications officer. "You say you get no response from our ships in orbit?"

"It's as if they are not there," the communications officer replied.

"That's because they are not!" he realized.

"How is that possible?" the communications officer wondered, looking perplexed.

"Order all forces not currently engaged with the enemy to report to the underground bunkers, immediately!" the general ordered.

The communications officer did not waste time responding, but rather carried out the general's orders without delay. "Attention! Attention! Orderly retreat to the bunkers! Take cover and prepare for bombardment!"

The ground started to vibrate beneath the general's feet. "Oh, God," he exclaimed as the intensity of the vibration increased. He looked at the view screens again, as a hailstorm of rail gun rounds began to pummel the garrison. Buildings exploded in clouds of dust and debris as the kinetic energy of the supersonic rounds blasted them wide open. Vehicles exploded. Bodies and body parts were strewn in all directions. Then the power went out and the command center was plunged into darkness. The general turned to head for the exit, but it was too late, as the ceiling came down on top of them in a deafening roar.

A vehicle full of Jung pilots screeched to a stop along the flight line at the air base outside of Galinda. Enemy fighters streaked overhead, appearing and disappearing behind blue-white flashes of light, remaining visible only long enough to deliver their weapons onto the hundreds of

fighters on the tarmac. The pilots jumped from the vehicle even before it stopped, hitting the ground in a run toward their waiting ships.

Two flashes of light appeared low over the horizon at the far end of the line of fighters. Trails of smoke announced their weapons release, and seconds later, the fighters at the far end of the line exploded, one after another. The enemy attackers opened up with their nose turrets, strafing the row of fighters as they passed overhead, destroying even more of them before they too disappeared in flashes of light.

Three of the Jung fighters managed to pull away without damage and roll out onto the open tarmac. Once clear of the line, they fired their lift thrusters and began to rise off the ground.

Enemy combat shuttles appeared all about the base as their flashes of light faded. The falling shuttles quickly stabilized into hovers less than four to five meters above the ground, remaining just long enough for six-man teams of black-clad soldiers to jump from their open doorways to the tarmac below. The soldiers hit the ground, running and firing with great precision. Shoulder-mounted mini-lasers found their targets with ease, burning down Jung troops attempting to repel the invaders with their invisible beams of intense energy.

The enemy combat shuttles, their passengers now on the ground, were free to maneuver. Each one spun around in choreographed fashion, immediately bringing their guns onto points of interest. Defense ground emplacements were targeted first, followed by armed vehicles and any soldiers foolish enough to attempt to fire on the shuttles.

The three Jung fighters had already climbed and begun their turn to engage several of the combat shuttles that were now peppering their fellow Jung on the surface. Just as

they brought their noses onto a group of shuttles, bolts of plasma energy tore through all three fighters, breaking them apart into fiery sections that tumbled to the ground and exploded, destroying more assets in the process. As the third fighter hit the ground and came apart, two of the enemy fighters streaked overhead, pitched up, and disappeared in flashes of light.

"Galinda has fallen," the warden's assistant reported. "It just came over the global command channel. Every major city reports contact with military forces wearing black armor. They say they are like none they have ever seen, rivaling our own Quintouri."

The warden looked at his assistant. "And the garrison?"

"It has been completely obliterated," his assistant replied. "From orbit, no less."

"Then our space forces must have been overpowered as well," the warden concluded.

"How can that be?" his assistant asked in disbelief.

"I do not know."

The assistant looked about, feeling helpless. "What are we to do? The prisoners are already restless, the bombings, the alarms... they know something is happening, something big. If any of them should manage to get free..."

"That will not happen," the warden insisted. "They are locked down tight, are they not?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then that is where they will stay," the warden insisted.

"Tower four is under attack!" a voice cried over the communications panel.

"Tower two is under attack!"

A distant explosion shook the room. The warden stumbled for a moment, then ran to the windows. On the far wall, across the compound below, a cloud of dust and smoke wafted upward slowly in the still night air. Guards rushed toward the dust cloud, weapons at the ready.

Red-orange bolts of energy leapt out of the dust cloud by the dozens, striking the guards down. In only an instant, what had been ten defenders was now zero. Out of the smoke and dust came soldiers clad in flat-black combat armor, their faces covered by reflective face shields. The enemy troops charged confidently forward, firing only as needed. They moved with grace, speed, and precision, spreading out across the compound as they headed for the various entrances into the main buildings.

"They are here," the warden gasped. He spun around to face his assistant. "Disable the system. Remove all power. Those prisoners must remain in custody!"

"Yes, sir!" his assistant replied. He repeated the warden's instructions over his headset, just as the lights went dark.

"I meant the cell controls, not the entire complex!" the warden barked.

"It was not us," his assistant replied. "They must have cut the power!"

"Call for an evac shuttle!" the warden demanded. "We have to get out of here!"

"How?" his assistant asked. "We have no power."

"A portable then," the warden insisted. "We will take a portable and go on the roof. A shuttle can pick us off the..."

"The portables do not have sufficient range," his assistant told him. "Even if they did, I doubt there are any shuttles available."

"Damn it! We have to try!"

Commander Telles stood in the mobile command post located on the recently captured air base outside of the Pylian city of Galinda, watching the various feeds from the dozens of Ghatazhak teams currently assaulting targets of concern all over the planet.

"Aurora flight ops reports they now control all Pylian airspace," Master Sergeant Jahal reported.

Commander Telles pointed at one of the view screens on the wall. "Is that..."

"Kellen?" the master sergeant replied. "Why yes, I believe it is."

"What is he doing?"

Master Sergeant Jahal cocked his head to one side as he examined the view screen. "I'm not sure," he replied, glancing down at his data pad. "His team was tasked with taking control of the Jung prison outside of Laminar."

"Audio," the commander ordered.

"There is no need," Lieutenant Kellen's voice said over the speakers in the mobile command center. *"Open the cells... all of them."*

The lieutenant's master sergeant looked at him, unsure of the lieutenant's decision. *"As you wish, sir."*

The view from the lieutenant's helmet camera shifted as the lieutenant moved out of the control cage and onto the landing that looked down over the cell block below. The cell block appeared to stretch into infinity from his perspective. An alarm squawked, and the sound of turning locks and sliding metal doors echoed through the massive, multi-tiered cell block. The lieutenant's head swept back and forth as he scanned the men moving tentatively out of their cells to see what was going on. *"Prisoners of the Jung!"* the lieutenant called out in full volume. *"I am Lieutenant Kellen*

of the Alliance! We have come to give you a chance at freedom! Take this prison now, then take back your world!"

Cheers erupted from the prisoners below, as they began to run toward the exits.

The lieutenant's helmet camera again moved about as the lieutenant moved back into the control cage to face his master sergeant. *"Order our men to retreat to the roofs of the cell blocks for extraction. Best that we stay out of the prisoners' way."* The lieutenant then looked directly into his master sergeant's helmet camera. *"Commander, I trust you'll send us a couple of jump shuttles?"*

Commander Telles looked at the flight controller and nodded. A small smile crept into the corner of his mouth. "Interesting tactic," he said to Master Sergeant Jahal. "We shall have to keep an eye on Lieutenant Kellen. He shows promise."

"I'll make a note of it, Commander," the master sergeant replied.

"Comms, message to the Aurora. Tell them that we should have complete control over the surface by local sunrise."

CHAPTER SIX

Casimir Ta'Akar sat quietly, watching the other nobles bicker. Such market conferences always descended into the same unproductive arguments, as nobles accused one another of trying to undercut them, and always in clear violation of whatever deals they had agreed upon behind closed doors. It had always amazed him how these men were never willing to commit the details of such arrangements to paper, yet were so quick to claim foul when someone failed to live up to their promises.

It was for this reason that he was not surprised that the nobles on the Security Council had so expertly avoided making any commitments to the support of Sol. He was quite certain, had he handed power to Parliament before signing the Alliance charter, the nobles would still be trying to find a way to sweeten that deal to their benefit as well. Although he did not agree with his dead brother's tactics, he did understand his desire to take action.

However, he still believed that, given time, the people of Takara would force their leaders to take responsibility and actually govern. In the meantime, however, the nobles were more worried about securing and possibly increasing their holdings before new regulations and changes in the economic structure of the Pentaurus cluster took effect. It was a distasteful situation, but one that had to be waited out. Eventually, the dust would settle, and the way forward would be clear to all.

"That propellant is not usable in our engines," Lord Markly argued.

The mention of propellant caught Casimir's attention, pulling him out of his daydreaming.

"Not as delivered, no," Lord Manglar agreed, "but it can be used by Volon and Palee, as well as many of the ships trading with the Haven group. Those ships will no longer be forced to buy our products, especially if the Tannan propellant is cheaper. And let us not forget, the conversion process is quick, and requires only a modest investment to make the propellant available in all formulas. If that happens..."

"You are worrying about something that has yet to, and may never become a reality," Lord Arralo chimed in. "The volumes currently being shipped are barely enough to generate the financial support needed for Casimir's escapades in the Sol sector... and let us not forget that it is nearly a thousand light years away. Regardless of the jump drive, it still takes time and resources to transport that propellant back to the Pentaurus sector. That is where our edge lies."

Casimir looked at Lord Arralo with disdain. "Escapades in the Sol sector? Is that what you think it is? Some sort of a 'pet project', a diversion for a rich prince? There are millions of people dying over there..."

"This is not the appropriate forum for this discussion," Lord Dahra interrupted.

"I think it is," Casimir insisted. "Dahra, Tammer, Markly... only Sorat and Larkspur are missing. Perhaps we should call them in and settle this now. After all, the more I have to finance this 'escapade' on my own, the more reason I have to flood Pentaurus markets with Tannan propellant. Is that not one of the topics of this meeting?"

"Are you threatening to..." Lord Markly began.

"I threaten no one," Casimir interrupted. "Unlike you people, I speak in facts, and I do not hide my intentions behind verbiage intended to distract." Casimir paused, looking at the nobles.

"Since you have already taken the floor, you might as well tell us what is truly on your mind, my prince," Lord Dahra said.

Casimir hated Dahra's use of the term 'my prince', as his use of it was not a show of respect, but rather disdain. Lord Dahra, in fact, the entire House of Dahra, had always disputed House Ta'Akar's position of leadership over that of their own. The condescending tone he used whenever he spoke to Casimir exhibited his continued feelings on the matter. At times, it was all Casimir could do to keep from slapping the old man across his unnaturally younger looking face.

"The propellant market is the least of your worries," Casimir began. "You should be worried about the technological advantages that Corinair, and any other member of the Alliance will have over us once the contents of the Data Ark have been translated and distributed."

"And why would that give others an advantage over Takara?" Lord Dahra wondered.

Casimir knew that Dahra was baiting him, but he did not care. "Because the Alliance is unlikely to share the contents with those who are not living up to their responsibilities under the charter."

"I'm confused," Lord Dahra replied. "Did we not repair their ship? Did we not supply them with additional crew? Did we not give them ample supplies to safely return to their part of the galaxy?"

"For which we received the jump drive technology."

"Quite correct. However, according to the terms of the Alliance charter, we have violated nothing. We are simply taking a reasonable amount of time in order to make a responsible decision about how best to support the Alliance's efforts in the Sol sector."

"I suspect that the Alliance may not interpret your intentions the same way," Casimir warned.

"You forget, my prince, that the data cores are here, on Takara."

"How could I have forgotten," Casimir retorted. "They are under my care, are they not?"

"Indeed they are," Lord Dahra agreed.

"And as their caretaker, I am bound by honor to do with them as their owners dictate."

Lord Dahra paused a moment, choosing his words carefully. "Prince Casimir, when you signed the Alliance charter, on whose behalf were you doing so?"

"Which time?" Casimir asked, his expression unchanged.

"Pardon?"

"My name is on the charter twice. Once for Takara, and once for the Karuzari Nation."

"Don't be ridiculous," Lord Dahra retorted. "The Karuzari Nation is nothing more than an asteroid base, wholly dependent upon outside support..."

"I beg to differ," Casimir interrupted. "They are a sovereign nation, with legitimate exports that they sell to..."

"They no longer reside within the sector..." Lord Dahra argued, his impatience beginning to show.

"There is nothing in the Alliance charter that says a member cannot relocate their entire world," Casimir said, purposefully interrupting Lord Dahra in return so as to further irritate him. "And, I suspect that as one who has

signed on behalf of both entities, I am more than honor bound to act in the interests of all parties..."

"You are honor bound to serve the people of Takara!" Lord Dahra insisted, his patience nearing its limits.

"...Therefore," Casimir continued, ignoring Dahra's outburst, "if the Alliance concludes that Takara has not fulfilled its duties under the charter, and they decide to withhold the contents of the Data Ark from them, then I shall be required to obey their..."

"What you are describing could be considered an act of treason!" Lord Dahra exclaimed. "You call yourself a Takaran, yet you..."

"Did you not claim, at the last Security Council meeting, that the Data Ark could not possibly contain anything of technological significance to the people of Takara?" Casimir argued. "If that is the case, Lord Dahra, then your concerns are unjustified, are they not?"

"Have you no honor?" Lord Dahra exclaimed.

"You do not know the meaning of the word!" Casimir shouted. "Not one of you!" he added, his open hand pounding the table. "You sit and discuss your business arrangements. You count your money, you maximize your holdings, and you tabulate your influences. Yet none of you is willing to risk anything for the greater good of Takara, let alone humanity in general!" Casimir laughed. "And you still have the unmitigated gall to call yourselves 'noblemen'?"

"You might want to choose your words more wisely, Casimir," Lord Dahra warned. "For the leader of House Ta'Akar should not go about making idle threats."

"I do not make threats, Lord Dahra," Casimir replied, his temper barely controlled. "I make statements of fact, and the fact is, that the Alliance is asking me if and when Takara will be sending aid. At this point in time, I am forced to tell

them that I have no answer, and I am not expecting one for several months at best. After which, I suspect the Alliance will insist that I hand the data cores over to the Corinairans, whom they rightfully trust a good deal more than the Takarans." Casimir stood and straightened his jacket. "That, my dear Lord Dahra, is what an honorable man does."

Casimir turned and headed out of the room.

"We have not finished this discussion, Casimir!" Lord Dahra exclaimed as Prince Casimir burst through the exit doors. "Do you hear me?"

The door closed behind Casimir as he marched out of the room and into the corridor, where his bodyguards waited. Behind him, the voices of the other lords could be heard as their own debates about his statements and intentions began.

"I take it the meeting went well?" Casimir's principal bodyguard inquired, a smile on his face.

"It could have gone better," Casimir admitted. "I suspect a timely departure from the building would be in order," Casimir added as he continued down the corridor past his bodyguards.

"Of course, sire," his principal bodyguard replied, falling into step behind his prince.

* * *

"Flight ops reports Commander Telles and the Pylian diplomats are on board, Captain," Ensign Gambara reported from the Aurora's comm station.

"Threat board, Lieutenant?" Nathan inquired from his command chair.

"Threat board is clear, sir," Lieutenant Delaveaga replied.

“Mister Riley, take us back to Sol.”

“Aye, Captain,” Ensign Riley acknowledged. “Plotting jump back to Sol.”

“Lieutenant,” Nathan said as he rose from his chair and headed aft. “Take us back to Sol and make port in the Karuzara. They have a new plasma cannon turret to install on our topside.”

“Aye, sir,” Luis replied.

“Send Commander Telles to my ready room when he arrives,” Nathan instructed the guard as he entered his ready room. He moved around his desk and took his seat, then called up the latest reports from the surface of Pylius. They had liberated the system and removed all Jung forces with surprisingly little loss of life. The Ghatazhak losses had been minimal, as had the collateral damage to the Pylians themselves. Even better, neither the Aurora, nor either of the Scout ships had sustained any damage. The KKV's had done their job on the battle platform and battle ship, just as planned. If the Karuzara work teams could crank out the kinetic kill vehicles even faster, they would be attacking Jung resources more frequently. However, eventually, they were going to need the Celestia in order to ensure success, especially as they got further away from Sol.

Although it originally had been his idea, Nathan found himself wondering, at times, if the Alliance really needed to clear the Jung any further out than twenty light years. Were they creating a ‘safe zone’ around Sol, or were they simply guaranteeing an overwhelming response from the Jung, one that made all previous attacks pale in comparison.

One thing was sure. The Earth needed time to recover, and the Alliance needed time to build its forces. The one-year time buffer that the twenty light year ‘Jung-free-zone’ provided was more likely a two to five year buffer. It would

take time for word of the liberation of these worlds to reach the Jung homeworld, wherever that world was. After that, it would take time for them to react, and to move ships and resources into position for another attack. And the more massive the attack, the greater time it would take to prepare.

This was precisely why the fast-attack ship production facility on Tanna needed to get under way as soon as possible. The various models envisioned would give them the ability to attack Jung assets anywhere within the Sol sector, and beyond, in short order. This was something that the Jung simply could not counter. Their only hope of survival, if faced with such a threat, would be to rally their ships around their home and create an impenetrable defensive zone. Of course, if they did so, they would undoubtedly concentrate their resources on countering the jump drive technology. The only way to do that was to get a jump drive of their own, and Nathan knew that it was only a matter of time before they did exactly that.

"Captain," Commander Telles called from the open hatchway.

"Commander," Nathan replied gesturing for the commander to enter.

Commander Telles entered the captain's ready room. "You wished to see me?"

"Yes. The Pylian minister insisted that his people would be able to maintain order themselves within the week," Nathan explained. "I was wondering if you agree with his assessment?"

"It is possible," the commander replied. "Plenty of Jung small and medium arms were captured intact, and, unlike the Coporans, the Pylians appear eager to be free of Jung rule and in control of their own destiny."

"And the Coporans did not," Nathan said, remembering the meek nature of the people of the 61 Cygni system.

"The people of Copora were more like *bera*."

"*Bera*?"

"I believe you call them 'sheep'."

Nathan nodded. "Yes, I got that impression as well."

"Do not get me wrong, Captain," Commander Telles explained. "I am not condemning the Coporans for their submissive nature. On the contrary, it takes a considerable amount of patience to allow yourself to be subjugated in exchange for peace and prosperity. I believe your Earth history is full of such examples. In many cases, your people were not even aware of their subjugation. After all, there are more ways to conquer a population than force. Military might is simply one of them."

"Politics by other means," Nathan mumbled.

"The most effective governments are the ones that manage to subjugate their populations without having to use such force. Often, those same populations are inviting such actions. I believe that the Coporans are such a population."

"Then you don't believe they will be a useful member of the Alliance?"

"As a contributor of resources? Perhaps," Commander Telles said. "As warriors joining in the fight... doubtful. The Pylans, on the other hand... I expect they will be lining up for the opportunity to kill more Jung."

"Yes, I saw the prison camera footage," Nathan commented. "I'm not sure how I feel about Kellen's tactics."

"I assure you, Captain, he was well aware of what he was doing. He had already been on Pylus for seventeen days."

"Some of those prisoners might have been incarcerated for good reason," Nathan said.

“According to Lieutenant Kellen, the prison contained only those who stood against the Jung occupation of Pylus. Those men had committed no crimes against their own people. Furthermore, the liberation of those men served as inspiration to the rest of the population. A ‘call to arms’ I believe you call it?”

“Another example of Ghatazhak ingenuity, then,” Nathan observed.

“Correct,” Commander Telles replied. “It is what the Ghatazhak are trained to do.”

“Well, I’m relieved to know that the lieutenant at least took the reason for their incarceration into consideration.”

Commander Telles looked confused. “Why would he not?”

Nathan smiled. “Then you’re fine with our turning control of Pylus over to their interim government as soon as practical.”

“Indeed I am, Captain. I could use the extra manpower. May I inquire as to how soon we will be able to depart for Porto Santo?”

Nathan looked at the status display on the main view screen on the forward bulkhead. “Looks like we’ve already jumped to Sol, Commander. So your shuttles can depart as soon as you’re ready.”

“Thank you, Captain. Until our next adventure, then.”

“Until then.”

* * *

“You spend a lot of time staring out windows these days, sire,” Major Bellen said as he entered Prince Casimir’s study.

“Everything that matters is out there,” Casimir said. “Out there, up there, over there...” He paused, turning back and

looking around his study. "There was a time when everything that mattered to me was contained within these walls, and on the lands just outside that window." He turned to look out the window again. "So long ago."

"I have received disturbing news from one of my sources within the Takaran communications division," Major Bellen said.

Casimir turned back to the major.

"A great deal of encrypted communications have been taking place among the various noble houses of Takara."

"Let me guess," Casimir said. "Dahra, Tammer, Markly..."

"And others," the major added. "Many others, I'm afraid. Most of the calls seem to originate from Dahra and Markly, going out to perhaps twenty other houses so far."

"Assessment?"

"I believe that Lords Dahra and Markly are attempting to contact as many houses as they feel comfortable. To what end, I cannot state, but my instinct tells me that it would be prudent to raise the level of security on House Ta'Akar."

"Perhaps you are correct," Casimir agreed. "Although I doubt it is anything more than pompous old men complaining to their fellow nobles about how I spoke to them today." Casimir thought for a moment. "Still, maintain discretion as much as possible. I do not wish them to know that I have taken such precautions. It might raise alarm among the people. Also, such posturing might send the wrong message to Dahra and his cohorts on the council. These are volatile times, my friend. We must take care not to light a fire that we are not prepared to extinguish."

"I shall be as discrete as possible, sire." Major Bellen stood there for a moment.

"There was something else, Major?" Casimir asked, noticing that his security chief had not departed.

"Forgive me, my lord, I do not wish to cast dispersions on the nobles..."

Casimir chuckled at the thought.

"...However, should Dahra and several others, as few as a half dozen houses, for example... should they join forces against us, we may not have the forces necessary needed to repel such an attack. I know such a thing is unthinkable. However, I feel I would be remiss if I did not mention..."

"Quite right, Major. Quite right." Casimir thought for a moment. "Major, your source at the Takaran communications division," Casimir began, "can he get a message out, discretely?"

"For what I pay him, I would expect so."

Casimir went to his desk and wrote on a small piece of paper, then handed it to the major. "Have this message sent, using my personal encryption key."

The major looked at the note, his eyebrow raising. "And he will have the ability to decrypt the message?"

"If he is half as smart as I need him to be... yes."

* * *

"It's been a week already," Naralena complained, in English, as they made their way down the empty corridor of the hotel. "How long is it going to take?"

"We'll give it up to ten days," Jessica said as they stopped at the door to their room. She pulled out the key card and passed it over the door control, unlocking the door. "If no one responds by then, we'll have to start doing our own recon," she said as she pushed the door open and entered the room.

"That won't be necessary," a voice said, in perfect Jung, from within the dimly lit hotel room.

Jessica reacted exactly as one might expect from a common Koharan girl working the streets, stopping dead in her tracks. "What the...? Who the fuck are you, and what are you doing in our hotel room?" she spouted, in common Cetian vernacular, and with the appropriate level of surprise, anger, and fear.

"Exactly the right response," the man replied.

Jessica switched to Jung. "I asked you a question, asshole!"

"Let's just call hotel security," Naralena urged Jessica, also using the Cetian language so as to stay in character.

"Good idea," Jessica replied in Koharan. She switched back to Jung to warn the man sitting in their room. "We're calling security, mister, so if you know what's good for you, you'll be long gone before we get back!"

"I highly doubt this hotel has anything remotely resembling security," the man said, this time in perfect English.

"What did you say?" Jessica asked, still speaking Jung. She had understood the man perfectly, but did not want to step into a trap.

"Neither your Jung nor your Koharan is that of a native speaker," the man said. "Your friend's is much better."

"What?" Jessica repeated, still pretending not to understand the man.

"You can drop the pretense," the man told her, continuing to speak in English. "I heard you speaking English as you were walking down the corridor." He held up a small transceiver, which Jessica assumed was receiving audio from devices the man had planted in the corridor. "Please, close the door, so that we may speak in private."

Jessica eyed the man suspiciously. His position in the corner of the room kept the light coming through the

windows from illuminating his face, leaving it in shadows. He also had both windows wide open to facilitate his escape should it become necessary. Although she could not tell, she expected that he had a weapon of some sort trained on them as well. After all, she certainly would.

"Please, you contacted me, remember?" He picked up the net pad on his lap and tossed it onto the floor in front of Jessica, screen side up. The screen lit up, revealing it to be Jessica's net pad.

Jessica moved further inside the room, stepping to the side to let Naralena in. As she passed, Jessica nudged Naralena to the left, reminding her to go to the opposite side of the room, just as she had been taught in such situation. Jessica swung the door closed, and moved to the right side of the room. The entire time, she kept her eyes on the man sitting in the far corner. "How did you find us?" she asked, now speaking English.

"Cetian network technology is far different than Earth's," the man began. "Every device is tracked. Location, usage, search history, messages... it is all stored in massive databases that can be accessed only by court order. Or so it was before the Jung. Jung officials may access the information at will."

Jessica's heart sank. Her first instinct was to try and overpower the man. She was quick, and she might even be quick enough to disarm him before he managed to get a shot off. Unfortunately, she had too little information to act. How old was he? What kind of shape was he in? Was he in fact armed, and if so, with what?

"So, are you taking us in?" Jessica asked, deciding to play along for now.

"Which academy did you attend?" the man asked.

Jessica's eyes squinted as she contemplated her response. "San Francisco," she replied.

"Nice try," the man replied, his tone hinting that he was entertained by her attempt to trick him. "There is no EDF academy in San Francisco."

"Yeah, I guess that would make sense, considering the city was pretty much abandoned after the big one back in thirty-four twelve."

"Another nice try. There was no 'big one' in thirty-four twelve. The last big earthquake in San Francisco was over seven hundred years ago. The city was doing quite well last time I was there."

"As what, a Jung spy?"

"Actually, I was born and raised not far from there," the man replied. "Now, which academy did you say you attended?"

"I didn't."

"Didn't what? Attend an EDF academy?"

"I didn't tell you which one," Jessica corrected. "North American, in Florida."

"Ah, then you must have had Colonel Lundsgrad as your spec-ops director."

"I did. But it's 'Lundsgrat', with a 't', not a 'd'."

"Of course," the old man replied. "It has been a while since I have used my English skills. So, tell me, how did you do on the Markson exams?"

"Sixty-eight," Jessica replied. "Not my best subject."

"On the contrary, it would appear that it is one of your better subjects. A perfect score is considered to be anything between sixty-five and seventy."

"Jesus," Jessica exclaimed, her body relaxing a bit. "You scared the shit out of me."

"I don't mean to be rude, my dear, but your craft is a bit sloppy. Speaking an outlawed language in a public corridor? You shouldn't even be speaking it while on the planet."

"And yet, you are," Jessica replied as she moved toward the light switch. "Do you mind?"

"Be my guest."

Jessica turned on the lights, getting a look at the man's face. His voice had belied his years. He was probably in his mid-sixties, but in good shape. He also had a trustworthy look about him, ideal for a deep-cover agent.

"You're older than I expected," Jessica told him. "No disrespect intended."

"I have been here a long time."

"How long?"

"Nearly forty years."

Jessica picked her net pad up from the floor and tossed it onto the bed. "Koharan years?"

"Earth years."

"Impossible," Jessica replied. "Our first FTL ships only left Earth twenty-five years ago."

"Or so you were all told," the man replied.

Jessica's eyes widened. "Aardvark?"

"Precisely."

"What is 'Aardvark'?" Naralena wondered as she sat down on the opposite bed.

"It was the name of an old spec-ops operation," Jessica explained. "We heard rumors about it back at the academy, but no one ever knew what it was. Most of us thought it was just a myth, something made up by senior classmates to fool the new guys." She turned back to the man. "So, you're saying that we had FTL ships sixty years ago? Thirty-five years *before* the first Scout ships left Earth?"

"I don't know that I'd call them 'ships'," the man said. "More like delivery systems. Small, very fast, automated. Just enough to deliver a single passenger to another world."

Jessica shook her head. "This doesn't add up. Forty years ago... the EDF was only what, one or two years old?"

"Three, actually," the man corrected. "It will all make sense to you, after I explain. For now, however, it would be best if we left this place. If I could find you so easily, so could the Jung."

"Right," Jessica agreed, grabbing her net pad.

"Leave it," the man instructed, "as well as any belongings you have accumulated. If your net pad is traced, it will lead them to this room. If your belongings are still here, then they will likely watch for your return... hopefully for some time."

"What about the bill?" Naralena asked. "We're only paid up for another week."

"Tell the man at the front desk that you are going to be staying for a month, until your new identity cards are issued. Ask for the monthly rate, so that he does not become suspicious." The man rose from his chair and moved toward the door. On his way, he handed Jessica a business card. "I trust you can find your way to my office?" He continued to the door, then stopped and turned back toward them. "The sooner the better."

Jessica watched as the old man exited, closing the door behind him. She looked down at the card he had given her.

Naralena was looking at Jessica. "What does it say?"

"Ellyus Barton, Realtor," she replied. "His office is on Parchene Boulevard."

"Do you think he is really EDF?"

"He made it through the authentication chain."

"Then you trust him?"

"Hell no," Jessica replied. "But he's got the skills, that much I'm sure of. He's also the only contact we've had since we got here. I say we run with it... cautiously."

* * *

Commander Erbe entered Captain Navarro's office, coming to attention before his commanding officer. "Commander Erbe, reporting as ordered."

Captain Navarro looked up from his data pad. "Are you Ghatazhak ever *not* dressed for battle?" he wondered.

"Only when we sleep, shit, and shower... sir."

Captain Navarro smiled. "It has been awhile, Arturo," he said, standing to greet his old friend.

"Indeed it has, Suvan," Commander Erbe replied, shaking the captain's hand. "I trust you are well?"

"Quite."

"I also trust it was you who arranged the transfer of myself, and my platoon?"

"That is correct."

"Was your previous platoon not serving you well?" the commander wondered as he took his seat.

"They served me well," Captain Navarro replied. "I simply needed someone that I was quite sure I could trust."

"Ghatazhak loyalty is programmed into our very souls, to both the chain of command as well as to the individual at the top of that chain."

"While that may be true, it has always been suspected that, given proper influences and reasons, a Ghatazhak may be steered 'away' from their programming."

"We are taught to think for ourselves," the commander admitted, "but there are limits to our self-determination. Limits that are extremely difficult to ignore."

"Yet, they *can* be ignored," Captain Suvan reminded.

Commander Erbe nodded reluctant agreement. "It is true that the more often a Ghatazhak's programming has been changed, the less effective that programming becomes."

"How many times have you been reprogrammed, my friend?"

"I have a total of three programming cycles to date," Commander Erbe replied. "The first was to your father, then to Caius, and now to you."

"So, it is safe to say that your loyalties would be primarily to House Navarro, with possible leanings toward that of House Ta'Akar as well?"

"A bit of a stretch, perhaps, as a Ghatazhak's loyalties are not to a house, but to an individual, but I do understand your logic." Commander Erbe adjusted himself in his chair, leaning forward in expectation. "I assume there is a reason to be considering such things?"

"Indeed there is," Captain Navarro replied. He handed him his data pad.

Commander Erbe read the data pad for a moment. He then took a deep breath and sighed. "I see." He looked at Captain Navarro. "This is most disturbing, Captain. If what you are showing me is discovered, there will be charges of treason filed. I trust you have given this decision its due consideration?"

"I have."

Commander Erbe looked at the data pad again, making quick mental calculations. "If this escalates, we shall require reinforcements."

"I had to trade my old platoon for yours," Captain Navarro told the commander. "So the most I can offer you at this time is transportation... combat ready, of course, and jump-capable."

Commander Erbe's left eyebrow raised. "My platoon should be able to handle the first assignment. However, it will take a minimum of thirty hours for us to obtain, reprogram, and awaken the reinforcements, and move them into position."

"What if you do not reprogram them?" Captain Navarro wondered. "How much time would that save?"

"At least ten hours," the commander replied. "However, without proper programming, they will fall back on their default loyalties."

"Which are?"

"To their commanding officer."

"In other words, to you," Captain Navarro.

Commander Erbe's eyebrow again went up. "A Ghatazhak's loyalty has always been set to that of a nobleman and his house."

"Not entirely accurate, I'm afraid," Captain Navarro corrected. "An entire platoon was programmed to be loyal to Captain Nathan Scott."

"The Terran boy-captain?"

"Correct. Another thousand were set to follow Admiral Travon Dumar, of the Alliance."

"In the case of Admiral Dumar, was he not granted nobility upon his retirement?"

"Yes, and then he sold all his new holdings and denounced his citizenship. He is currently the leader of the Karuzara Nation."

"Still, that is not the same as programming Ghatazhak loyalty to another Ghatazhak," Commander Erbe insisted.

"No, it is not," Captain Suvan agreed. "However, we are not *programming* anyone. We are simply not taking the time to give them more *exact* programming."

"The result is the same," Commander Erbe warned. "They will be loyal to me, a Ghatazhak commander."

"One whose own loyalties I trust completely."

Commander Erbe looked long and hard at Captain Navarro. "You are much as your father before you was."

"I shall take that as a compliment, my friend."

"As you should," Commander Erbe replied as he stood. "I assume my actions are to be covert."

"In as much as possible, yes," Captain Navarro replied. "Arturo, everything I know about the situation is contained within that data pad. You know my intentions. I am trusting you to use your own judgment on how to best support my efforts in this matter."

"You can expect nothing less."

* * *

Jessica and Naralena entered the realty office on Parchene Boulevard. The space was clean and professional, with a reception desk and windowed offices overlooking the lobby.

"May I help you?" the receptionist behind the counter asked in Jung.

"We're here to see Mister Barton?" Naralena answered.

"One moment please," the woman replied, casting a barely hidden disapproving glance at their choice of clothing.

Jessica moved to a nearby seat in the waiting area, picking up a media tablet on the side table as she sat. She began leafing through the pages on the tablet, pretending to be interested in the contents.

A few minutes later, Ellyus Barton came into the lobby. "Ladies, it is such a pleasure to see you again," he greeted,

again in perfect Jung. "I was afraid that you might have chosen another agency."

"Not after such a pleasant introduction earlier," Naralena replied, playing along.

"I take it then, that you are still in the market for a place in the city?"

"Indeed we are," Naralena replied. "I hope the hour is not too late?"

"Nonsense," Ellyus insisted. "It is no problem at all. Come, let us sit and discuss your needs further in my office."

"Thank you," Naralena replied, following the realtor into the corridor.

The two of them followed Mister Barton down the short corridor, entering a much larger, private office at the end. Once inside, they took their seats as their host closed the door, and then activated some control panel beside the door.

"This room is acoustically sealed," he explained in English, as he moved behind his desk and sat down. "People in this city are sticklers for confidentiality," he added, "especially when it comes to real estate transactions."

"Why a realtor?" Naralena wondered, also switching to English.

"Gives him an excuse to travel and poke around," Jessica surmised. "Not a bad cover."

"It has worked out quite nicely," he admitted. "Not only was I able to explore this world, but I was also able create a comfortable lifestyle for myself and my family."

"Your family?" Jessica asked.

"Yes, I know that the idea was frowned upon by spec-ops procedures, but as I got older, I began to feel out-of-place in Koharan society."

"The real deal, or just a cover?" Jessica wondered.

"The real deal," he assured her. "Makes it easier. To be honest, I had all but given up on the EDF ever sending any other operatives my way, not after the first batch got made."

"What do you mean, got made?" Jessica asked. "They got caught?"

"I don't actually know," he admitted. "There were eight of them altogether. I was sent here twenty years ahead of time, to act as their handler. It was my job to gather intelligence, learn how to blend into Koharan society, and then help them get settled when they arrived. All of which I did, exactly according to plan."

"What happened to them?" Jessica wondered.

"As I said, I do not know. I know two of them died in accidents. The other six simply stopped making contact. You are the first contact I've had with anyone from the EDF in over twenty years."

"How do you know we're not Jung spies?" Jessica asked.

"At this point, it seemed highly unlikely. I mean, after all this time, what would the point be? I have no information to offer them, and if indeed they had spies on Earth as long as I've been here, then they already know more about Earth than I could ever tell them."

"Good point."

"So, tell me, how are things on Earth?"

Naralena looked at Jessica out of the corner of her eye.

"Shouldn't you at least ask our names first?" Jessica wondered.

"Yes, of course. My apologies."

"My name is Jennifer," Jessica began, "and this is Nora."

"A pleasure to meet you both." Ellyus looked oddly at them. "I am surprised to see two operatives traveling

together, however. That was not SOP in my day.”

“Perhaps they changed procedures because so many operatives disappeared?” Naralena suggested.

“A possibility, yes,” Ellyus agreed. “So, what is going on back on Earth? I have heard rumors that the Jung have already invaded.”

Jessica noticed a sincere look of concern on the old man’s face. “Yes, they have,” she told him. “But we managed to regain control, and now we are in the process of removing their forces from every system within twenty light years of Sol.”

Ellyus’s mouth dropped open. “You’re kidding me! How is that even possible? Surely they didn’t use... I mean, they must have built bigger ships... ships with FTL...”

“Whoa,” Jessica said, interrupting the old man. “A lot has happened on Earth since you’ve been gone.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just that ever since the rumors started floating around, my mind has been running wild with speculation.”

“Yes, we did build bigger ships... much faster and much more powerful.”

“Powerful enough to take on the Jung directly?”

“So far, yes,” Jessica told him.

“How many ships did they build?”

“I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to discuss such things,” Jessica told him, “and, I don’t really know, to be honest. You see, things have changed in spec-ops as well. We are no longer part of the academy. At least not the covert section of spec-ops. So, we don’t really have much more knowledge about the state of things than the average person on Earth. That way, if we get captured, we have nothing to betray.”

“But surely, you must have some details,” Ellyus insisted.

"To be honest, I don't even know if what I think I know is true. The only thing I am sure of is that I have been tasked with securing as much information about the Jung forces in the Tau Ceti system as possible. I was instructed to attempt to make contact with any EDF operatives on Kohara, in the hopes that they have information that I can use."

"To what end?" Ellyus wondered. "Are they planning to invade the Tau Ceti system?"

"Again, I don't know," Jessica reminded him. "Seems like a pretty good bet, though, don't you think?"

"Amazing," Ellyus exclaimed.

"Do you have any intelligence that might be useful?" Jessica wondered.

"Yes, of course. I've been gathering it for decades. Not as actively as before, mind you. Like I said, I had all but given up on the EDF."

"Let's have it, then," Jessica said.

"It's not here," he replied. "I store it on encrypted data chips in a safe deposit box, in a bank in a neighboring city. It will take me several days to retrieve them."

"Very well," Jessica said, "but the sooner the better. We were given a thirty-day deadline, of which only twenty-four days remain."

"Understood. I will send one of my sons to retrieve the chips."

"Are you sure that's wise?" Jessica asked.

"They are contained in deed packets, so as not to draw undue suspicion. It is a common practice to store deeds in such a fashion. It would not be the first time I have asked him to run such an errand for me."

"Very well. I guess we'll head back to the hotel then, and wait for word from you," Jessica said.

“Nonsense, you will stay here,” Ellyus insisted. “We have a suite upstairs for our higher-end clients to use when they are in town to conduct business. It is quite luxurious, and quite private. You will be far safer, and far more comfortable there.”

“Will we be free to come and go as we please?” Jessica inquired, not about to put herself and Naralena at the sole mercy of a man they had just met.

“Of course. There is a private entrance. You may come and go as you please. I can even have a driver available for you, should you choose to do some sight-seeing... if you know what I mean.”

Jessica looked at Naralena. As little as she trusted Ellyus Barton, she trusted that seedy hotel even less.

* * *

“You do not care for your dessert, Nalaya?” Casimir asked.

“It is too sweet,” his youngest daughter replied.

Deliza looked at the young pastry chef standing in the corner of the dining room, noticing the crestfallen look on his face. “I thought it was quite wonderful,” she chimed in.

“Papa, must I eat it?” Nalaya asked.

“No, my dear, not if you do not wish to,” Casimir assured her. “Your vegetables, yes. Dessert, however, is optional.” He touched her head gently. “Perhaps you should go and get ready for bed, little one. I shall be there shortly to tuck you in.”

Nalaya climbed out of her chair and headed off through the exit, one of House Ta’Akar’s security guards in tow.

Casimir looked at Deliza, whose eyes darted toward the pastry chef sulking in the corner. “Do not let the little one’s

critique offend you," he said to the pastry chef. "I found it quite satisfying as well."

"On Haven, desserts were rare, as sweeteners were hard to come by," Deliza explained. "Our mother would make such pastries on occasion, but they had only the faintest bit of sweetness to them, usually through the use of the few sweet fruits available at the local markets."

"It is quite all right, my lady," the pastry chef insisted. "I understand."

"Perhaps, with Nalaya's help, you might concoct a reasonable facsimile of the deserts her mother made for her?" Casimir suggested. "I know Nalaya would love to help. She always enjoyed helping her mother."

"It would be an honor, sire," the pastry chef replied.

"Do not expect too much help, however," Casimir warned. "If memory serves, Nalaya's expertise was more in the tasting department."

The pastry chef smiled. "The princess would be most welcome, sire."

"Father," Deliza began, "about the extra security. Am I to be followed everywhere I go?"

"I'm afraid so," Casimir replied. "At least for the time being."

"It can be most bothersome," Deliza complained.

Casimir noticed his oldest daughter's eye as they made the briefest of contact with Mister Hiller's eye across the table from her. "Do not worry, Deliza. Once the nobles agree to support the Alliance, the tensions between our houses will return to normal levels, as will the security measures."

Deliza did not respond, only making eye contact with Yanni again.

"Mister Hiller," Casimir said, getting the young man's attention as well as giving him a bit of a start. "I understand

the copy process has been completed?"

"Uh, yes, sir, it has. Just today, in fact," Yanni answered. "Well, actually it was completed a few days ago, but the verification process was completed just this morning. The Takaran translations should be done in a few days."

"That is wonderful news," Casimir said. "I suppose you are looking forward to returning to Earth."

"Uh, I suppose so, yes," Yanni replied, stumbling on his words a bit.

Casimir noticed the expression on his daughter's face. "Not that you are not welcome to stay as long as you like, Mister Hiller. However, the original cores will be sent back to Earth relatively soon. I just assumed that you would be returning with them, seeing as how you were tasked with their safekeeping."

"Yes, that would be correct, sir." Yanni glanced at Deliza, expecting her to say something, but she did not.

"I'm sure that Deliza will miss the stimulating conversations the two of you have shared on so many occasions," Casimir added, a knowing smile on his face.

Deliza gave her father a look, as if to tell him not to speak any longer. "Yes, I have enjoyed our scientific musings a great deal," she said. "They will indeed be missed."

Casimir had to fight to keep himself from laughing out loud. "Well," he said, taking a deep breath and standing. "If you will excuse me, I must tuck Nalaya in for the night. A good evening to you, Mister Hiller. Deliza."

"Father," Deliza replied tersely.

The room was silent until Casimir departed and the door had closed behind him.

"Why did you not tell him?" Yanni asked in a whisper.

"That I'm in love with you? I'm not yet of age," Deliza reminded him.

"Actually, I was talking about you going back to Earth with me, as a scientific consultant, but..."

"He would have seen right through that, Yanni."

"So what?"

"If he knew that we were—you know—he would kill you!"

"He's not going to kill me, Deliza. He's not that kind of man."

"That's what I thought before I found out he was the leader of the Karuzari."

"Deliza, he's your father. Besides, you're a grown woman. On my world, you'd be old enough to marry..."

"This isn't your world, Yanni. It isn't even mine, not really."

"It's alright, Deliza," Yanni said, rising from his seat and moving around the table to sit next to her. "There is still plenty of time. The translations will take a few more days. Besides, it's not like they have a jump shuttle on standby waiting to whisk us away. Transportation will have to be arranged..."

"I just don't want to lose you, Yanni."

"You're not going to lose me, Deliza. I promise. I can stay here if I have to. They don't need me to go back to Earth with the cores. Perhaps we can convince them to send the copies back, and keep the original cores here, on Takara. Then I can remain here as their caretaker."

Deliza looked at Yanni. "You'd do that? You'd stay here, with me?"

Yanni moved in closer to Deliza, putting his arm around her. "Of course I would. You know that."

* * *

Jessica reached the bottom of the stairs that led from the guest suite down to Ellyus Barton's real estate office. He had told her that he usually worked for an hour or two after the office had closed and everyone had gone home for the day, so she figured it might be a good time to talk more with him. Although she still did not trust him, she thought she might try to glean some more information about the Jung in the Tau Ceti system, as well as the state of mind of the citizens. Were they happy? Did they hate the Jung? Did they love them? More importantly, would they fight alongside them if the Jung were attacked?

She opened the door slowly and stepped into the dark offices. The corridor lights were off, and the only light came from Ellyus's office at the far end of the corridor. She glanced toward the lobby and saw that it was dark as well.

Jessica went down the corridor to Ellyus's office. As she approached, she could see him sitting at his desk, turned to his left, facing the side wall. She approached, taking care to make enough noise that she did not appear to be sneaking up on him.

She got to the doorway to his office, and tapped lightly on the door frame. "Mister Barton?" she called, but got no response. His attention seemed to be focused on his computer screen. "Ellyus?" Still no response. He also didn't appear to be moving. "Ellyus?" she said, this time a bit louder. Still, there was no response. She looked behind her, back down the corridor, then entered the office and closed the door rather hard, again hoping to get his attention. She moved across the office to her right, in front of Ellyus's desk. As she reached the point where she could see him in full profile, she realized he was not staring at his computer screen. He was staring straight ahead, at the wall.

"Ellyus?"

He was breathing, and his skin color appeared normal, yet he sat there, unmoving, as if in a catatonic state, unblinking, staring at a blank wall. She reached out and waved her hand in front of his face.

Ellyus blinked, then turned his eyes toward Jessica, becoming startled by her sudden presence. "Oh, Jesus," he exclaimed. "When did you come in?"

"You didn't hear me calling you?" Jessica asked.

"It must have happened again," Ellyus mumbled, rubbing his face with his hands.

"What happened again?"

"I don't know what *it* is," he explained. "My kids used to call it 'the stares'. My wife called it 'switching off'."

"So, this has happened to you before?"

"Yes." Ellyus stood up and moved to the small refrigerator in the corner of his office and pulled out a bottle of water. "It used to happen a lot, maybe once or twice per week."

"How long has it been going on?"

"I'm not really sure. For as long as I've been married, at least. It may have happened before then, but since I was usually alone, no one told me it was happening."

"You mean, you don't *realize* it's happening to you?" Jessica asked, taking a seat.

Ellyus finished taking a long drink from the bottle, then sat down again. "Never. When my wife first told me about it, I figured I was just deep in thought, and she hadn't really tried to get my attention as vocally as she had claimed."

"Did you ever see a doctor about it?"

"I told my wife I did. I told her they couldn't determine the cause. I don't drive because of it."

"Why didn't you see a doctor about it?"

"I didn't want to blow my cover. When I first arrived on Kohara, there was some kind of illness going around. Like a flu or something. It was something that the Jung had brought with them. Everyone on Kohara was being vaccinated, including me. I had a bad reaction to the vaccine and spent several days in the hospital. They found some abnormalities in my blood. I was lacking something that everyone else around here had, some enzyme or something that comes from eating food grown here. I left before they could ask more questions. I've stayed away from doctors ever since."

"Do you think it was caused by the vaccine?" Jessica wondered.

"That's what I thought at first as well, but I've spent thousands of hours on the networks, and I've never found anything like this as a result of the vaccine. Not even close. Personally, I think it's a side effect from the five years I spent in DMS on the way here."

"We don't call it 'decreased metabolic state' anymore," she told him. "The common vernacular is 'cold-sleep' or 'SA'. Of course, we don't use that technology at all these days."

"You don't?" Ellyus seemed surprised. "Then how did you get here?"

"Let's just say that our ships are *much* faster now."

"Amazing." Ellyus looked at her for a moment. "So much must have changed on Earth during my absence. It's hard to comprehend it."

"You don't know the half of it, Ellyus."

"I know you don't trust me, Jennifer, and I do not expect you to, but I do hope that someday, when whatever is about to happen is over, you will tell me more about Earth."

Jessica laughed. "What makes you think something is 'about' to happen?" she asked.

"Why else would you and your friend be here? And why would you have a deadline?"

"A logical conclusion, I guess." She looked at him a moment. "So, you really don't have any idea when it happens to you?"

"None."

"No headaches, no dizziness, not even dry eyes from staring?"

"None. Actually, the times that my wife has been there to witness the event, I have even felt somewhat refreshed, as if I had taken a nice nap. I think that's where she came up with the description, 'switching off'."

"And how long do these events last?" Jessica wondered.

"According to my wife, only a few minutes. Odd thing is, I haven't had one in, I don't know, maybe twenty years? I honestly thought whatever it was had cured itself, until now."

"Well, maybe after whatever is 'about to happen', as you put it, is over, you'll be able to see someone about it. So, any progress on the files?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Not yet, I'm afraid. I told my son to take extra precautions this time, so it may take him a bit longer than usual."

"That doesn't make him suspicious?"

"Not in the slightest," Ellyus replied. "He knows I handle some very big clients... clients that prefer to remain discrete, for market reasons."

Jessica leaned back, looking at Ellyus for a moment, thinking.

"Something wrong?"

"It doesn't worry you, that you're putting your son in harm's way without his consent?"

"I'm not," Ellyus insisted. "He has no knowledge of my true identity, nor my mission here on Earth."

"Still, guilt by association, and all that."

"Not with the Jung," Ellyus insisted. "They don't need to. They have the ability to tell, beyond a shadow of doubt, whether or not you are telling the truth. If he was arrested with those documents, and the Jung determined the true nature of those documents, he would claim to know nothing, and they would believe him."

"Still, it must be hard to keep such secrets from them."

"Not at all," Ellyus assured her. "It is what it is. I chose this life. It did not chose me. Furthermore, I technically have not yet committed any crimes against the Jung or Koharan society, as all I have done is to collect information. I have yet to pass it on to an enemy of this world."

"But, you are about to," Jessica reminded him.

"Indeed I am," he admitted. "So you can see how I might have a vested interest in making sure that whatever is about to happen, is as successful as possible... for my family's benefit more so than for my own."

"Life is that bad here?" Jessica wondered. "Because to be honest, compared to other Jung worlds I've seen, this one isn't bad at all."

"You've seen other Jung-occupied worlds?" Ellyus wondered, looking genuinely surprised.

"I was referring to Earth, when it was occupied by the Jung."

"Of course," Ellyus said. "Actually, the Jung occupation of the Tau Ceti system was not all that bloody. I did not experience it firsthand, as it occurred about a year before my arrival. You see, the Cetians had no significant military

forces. In fact, although all three worlds had been in contact with one another for nearly a century, they had only recently developed an interplanetary space program. The Jung actually brought all three Cetian worlds together again, for the first time in nearly a thousand years. Now, people can travel between the Cetian worlds with relative ease. Not everyone, mind you, but most. It is a bit on the expensive side. However, the trade opportunities that it has opened up have been quite lucrative for all worlds."

"Then, the Jung are welcome here?"

"I don't know that I would go as far as to call them 'welcomed', but the number who oppose the continued occupation are definitely in the minority, as best I can tell. It's not like people talk about it openly. After all, Jung cameras and listening devices *are* everywhere."

"Everywhere?"

"Well, in most public places, anyway."

"And *that* doesn't bother the Koharans?" Jessica wondered.

"You'd be surprised what people are willing to put up with, in exchange for peace and security," Ellyus told her.

"Yeah, I've heard that before."

* * *

Guards dressed in blue jackets with scarlet trim patrolled the grounds in pairs. Pitoria was absent from the skies this night, and Hermes and Arkana were both too low on the horizon at this later hour to provide significant light. Because of this, the guards walked more slowly than usual, taking extra time to examine the shadows in greater detail. On occasion, they paused to shine their portable lights into areas not properly illuminated by the lantern posts scattered

throughout the ornate and meticulously landscaped compound. In addition, the fog that normally rolled in from the nearby ocean had reached inland earlier than usual. The effect was a dark, mysterious scene that was both magical and frightening. The combination was what the locals referred to as '*tal-sharet*'.

Two guards passed their counterparts patrolling in the opposite direction, nodding recognition but exchanging no further information, as per protocol. Each team continued on their designated patrol route along the garden pathways that wound their way around and between the buildings. As each team turned their respective corners and fell out of view from one another, they stopped for a moment to examine the new area revealed to them, also according to protocol.

Two tiny projectiles silently pierced the fog, causing it to swirl for a moment, after which the two guards dropped to their knees, their heads exploding to their sides and their bodies toppling forward to the ground.

Around the opposite corner, in the direction from which the first guards had come, the fog again swirled as fast-moving projectiles silently found the other pair of guards, dropping them to the ground in similarly gruesome fashion. As puddles of dark red blood began to spread out from the heads onto the pavement, hooded men clad in flat-black combat attire floated down from above, landing gently on the grass nearby. The men began to scurry toward the fallen guards as the black parachutes that had carried them down automatically detached from their backs and fell away behind them. The first two men who landed jumped over the fallen guards and moved quickly down the path toward the next building. The next two grabbed the fallen guards and

dragged them into nearby bushes, then joined the first two men to enter the building.

All about the compound a similar scene played out in near-simultaneous fashion. In the blink of an eye, four pairs of guards, eight highly trained men, had been struck down in complete silence. All without causing any alarm to those inside. To anyone who might step out into the garden from some fresh air a minute later, it would appear to be just another night filled with the *tal-sharet*.

"Whoa," the security guard exclaimed as all of his camera feeds suddenly went black. "What the hell?" He began pressing buttons on the console in front of him, trying to determine what had gone wrong, and more importantly, how to get the cameras back up.

"It has to be a problem with the main control unit," the other guard said.

"Better call it in."

"Lieutenant Dante, Control. We have lost all cameras."

"What? Did you check the controller?"

"Yes, sir," the second guard insisted over the communications system. "Three times. We're rebooting it now."

"Did the automatic distress call go out?"

"Yes, sir, the moment the power went out, the distress call was transmitted to Answare security."

"Very well. Alert all principals, as well as the barracks officer of the watch. Wake everyone. I'll notify the major."

"Yes, sir," the guard replied. They were the last words he would speak.

The sound of tiny pieces of broken glass hitting the console and the floor was heard, as more projectiles stuck

each guard in the forehead, blowing the backs of their skulls open and spewing blood and cerebral tissue across the wall behind them. The door opened, and two hooded men in flat-black attire swiftly entered the room. A few presses of buttons on the console and the lights went out all over the compound.

“I miss Mama,” Nalaya said.

The sadness in her voice broke Casimir’s heart, as it was his fault that she had been killed. The moment he had seen Jalea with Nathan and his entourage, he knew that things were about to change. He could have simply refused the inquiry, lied to them and told them that he had no more molo for sale, and then referred them to one of the other vendors. Had he done so, his wife, his children’s mother, would still be alive.

“I miss her as well,” Casimir admitted, appearing sympathetic yet stoic. He stroked her fine, golden hair, gazing in her green eyes. She was the spitting image of her mother, all the way down to the slight bump on the bridge of her tiny nose. “However, I am sure that she is happy to see how well your new life is going. All the pretty dresses, the comfortable beds, and the yummy desserts. She is also very happy that you are talking again, as are we all.”

“Not Miss Parlette.”

“Your teacher?” Casimir wondered.

“She says I ask too many questions.”

“You tell Miss Parlette that if you don’t ask too many questions, then you will never have enough answers.”

“I shall, Papa.”

“Good.” Casimir kissed her on the forehead.

“Papa?”

"Yes?"

"I'd rather be back on Haven, with Mama, than have all the pretty dresses in the world."

"Me too, little one. Me too."

The lights went dark.

"I'm not sleepy yet, Papa. Will you..."

"Hush," Casimir interrupted, concern in his tone. He glanced toward the window and saw no lights in the garden as well.

The door burst open and two dark figures charged into the room.

"Sire, we must go!" one of the men exclaimed as he rushed toward Casimir.

A sense of relief washed over Casimir as he recognized the voice of Sergeant Paloma, one of his personal bodyguards. "Nalaya," he demanded.

"I will see to her, sire," the second guard replied.

Casimir recognized the second guard's voice as well. It was Nalaya's personal bodyguard, Sergeant Whittaker. Both men had been waiting outside her bedroom door. "What's going on?"

"Papa!" Nalaya cried out in fear.

"It is alright, little one!" Casimir replied.

"All power is down," Sergeant Paloma explained.

"Come with me, Nalaya," Sergeant Whittaker soothed as he snatched her from her bed.

"Comms as well," Sergeant Paloma continued.

"Papa!"

"Go with Sergeant Whittaker, Nalaya!" Casimir instructed. "He will protect you!"

"Papa!"

"I will be right behind you, Nalaya!"

"We have to go, sire!" Sergeant Paloma insisted.

"What about Deliza?" Casimir demanded.

"Everyone will rendezvous in the safe room," Sergeant Paloma reminded him, "per protocol."

Sergeant Whittaker stood next to the open doorway, his back against the wall, Nalaya in his left arm, his energy weapon in his right.

"Follow me, sire," Sergeant Paloma instructed. They moved to the open doorway, pausing for the sergeant to glance down the dark corridors.

"In my right boot, sire," Sergeant Whittaker urged, "a weapon, take it."

Casimir did not hesitate, raising the sergeant's pant leg and extracting the small energy pistol from the man's boot.

"It's clear," Sergeant Paloma whispered.

"I'm scared," Nalaya cried.

"You must be quiet," Sergeant Whittaker urged Nalaya, trying to offer as soothing a tone as possible.

"Do as the sergeant says, Nalaya," Casimir urged. "Quiet as a *dongarro*," he added as he followed Sergeant Paloma out the door and into the corridor.

"What is happening?" Deliza exclaimed as the lights went out in the dining room.

"I don't..." Yanni's words were cut short as four men burst into the room.

"Princess!" one of the men called out in a loud whisper. He noticed the two of them in the darkness, sitting off to one side, and moved toward them. "We must go!"

"What is going on?" Deliza pleaded.

"Possible security breach," the guard explained. "No lights, no comms. Protocol says we take you and Mister Hiller to the safe room as quickly as possible."

"Don't you have any lights? I can't see anything," Deliza wondered as she stood to leave.

"Can't use them," the guard insisted. "If there are snipers outside the windows, the lights would give away our positions."

"Snipers?" Yanni wondered.

"Oh, my God," Deliza exclaimed.

"We must go, now," the guard urged.

"My father! My sister!" Deliza said.

"They will meet us there, come!"

Red bolts of energy streaked across the foyer, blowing holes in the wall, and lighting everything they touched ablaze. House Ta'Akar security forces returned fire, sweeping the entrance with their own energy weapons, but the attacking forces were far too precise, picking the defenders off one by one without a single casualty among the attacking forces. The house security forces tried to call for help, but got nothing but static from the portable comms. In less than a minute, there was no one left alive to call for help.

The leader of the attacking group stepped forward, examining the fallen guards of House Ta'Akar. "Prepare the data cores for departure!" he ordered in a deep and gravelly voice.

They paused briefly at the end of the corridor, squatting down at the corner as Sergeant Paloma peered cautiously around the corner. The next corridor was as dark as the last, with almost no light shining in the windows. He could hear the sound of distant energy weapons fire, coming from

outside the building. "Do you hear that?" he said to Casimir behind him.

"It's coming from the lab," Casimir realized. "They're after the cores!"

"There are ten men assigned to that building," Sergeant Paloma reminded him. The weapons fire stopped. The two of them stood silent for the moment. "You see, they have undoubtedly defeated the attackers."

"Or the attackers defeated our guards," Casimir replied. "We cannot let those cores out of our control..."

"My orders are to get you to the safe..." Sergeant Paloma's head came apart as an energy bolt slammed into the left side of his head, causing the right side to explode, spraying Casimir's face with scalding hot blood and brains.

Casimir gasped in shock and horror, the effect of which lasted but a second. He spit out bits of the dead sergeant that had landed in his open mouth, as he brought his weapon around the corner, above the headless torso of his dead sergeant still leaning against the wall, and returned fire. Another bolt of energy slammed into the dead sergeant, heating up his torso and blowing more blood and tissue out his back. Casimir was forced to duck back behind the safety of the corner. "Withdraw!" he ordered Sergeant Whittaker. "Back the way we came! We can escape through Nalaya's window!"

Casimir fired three more shots blindly around the corner as Sergeant Whittaker turned and headed back down the corridor the way they had come. Four energy weapons shots sounded from the opposite end of the corridor, two of them streaking over Casimir's head and slamming into the wall beyond, causing him to cringe and duck. He heard his daughter scream. His eyes opened as the sergeant collapsed to his knees, releasing his grip on the child and

letting her fall to the floor as two more shots slammed into his chest, sending sizzling tissue spraying in all directions as his body fell backwards.

Casimir ran toward his daughter, firing wildly at the black-clad intruders at the far end of the corridor. He scooped her up with his left arm, pulling her in close to his body as he turned to his left and continued firing to his right. Two more steps to his right and he pivoted, falling into the door to one of the many guest rooms and causing it to open.

Casimir found himself on his back, still clutching Nalaya against his chest. He heard a scream; that of a young woman, followed by more weapons fire. His mind raced. He considered escaping through the window, but he knew they were outside as well, and out in the open, he didn't stand a chance. He felt a panic wash over him as he heard the screams again. He had to help her. He had to help Deliza, but he also had to protect Nalaya.

Casimir looked at his youngest. "Go and hide, Nalaya. Hide so no one can find you. Do not come out until I call for you. Go!"

Nalaya climbed off her father's chest and ran across the room, crawling under the bed. Casimir scrambled to his feet, moving to the wall next to the door. He peeked out as best he could, but could see nothing. Yet, he could still hear weapons fire from somewhere in the house, and the sounds of men yelling, and his daughter, Deliza, screaming.

Lights began to shine in the window from the courtyard outside. The sounds of vehicles... men shouting... then more weapons fire. The intensity increased. He heard a man barking orders at others in a calm, controlled fashion. He heard the sound of sizzling flesh in the corridor, and the agonizing screams of the dying.

Then the sound of heavy boots on marble floors... and the sound of body armor... the unmistakable sound it made when its wearers were running, moving, fighting. The sounds of the battle raging in the corridor grew closer and more ferocious. Then, just as quickly as they had begun, they stopped. No more weapons fire, only the sound of armored troops moving about with practiced precision. Squad leaders barking orders, and the occasional groan of the dying.

A man appeared in the doorway, startling Casimir for a moment. He was of average height and weight, and was clad in black body armor, and the distinctive helmet of the Ghatazhak. "Sire," the soldier called out to him. "Are you injured?"

Casimir shook his head, still in shock. "No," he mumbled. His attention suddenly turned back to his daughter. "Nalaya!"

The Ghatazhak soldier watched as Prince Casimir dropped his weapon and scrambled across the floor toward the bed, as Nalaya crawled out from underneath. He grabbed her and scooped her up in arms, struggling to get to his feet. He turned to the Ghatazhak soldier. "My other daughter?"

"She is fine," the soldier promised. "If you will follow me, I shall take you to her."

"Of course," Casimir said. "Thank you." He followed the soldier into the corridor, immediately turning his daughter's face toward his chest and covering her head with his free hand so that she could not look down at the bloody, still smoldering bodies of their would-be attackers. The stench of burning flesh, blood, and clothing filled the air, as did swirls of multicolored smoke. Some of the clothing of the men was

still burning as he followed the soldier, stepping over the burning bodies along the way.

A minute later, he heard Deliza's voice.

"Father!" Deliza called out, running toward him.

Casimir put his right arm around his oldest daughter, she in turn with both arms around him and Nalaya. Casimir looked at Yanni standing against the wall not four meters distant. He looked frazzled, with blood strewn across his body, and a deep burn across his left arm, which he held gingerly. He made eye contact with the young man, the two of them passing an unspoken message of concern for one another.

Casimir heard more Ghatazhak coming up the corridor from behind him. He turned and saw five men, one of which was their leader. He put Nalaya down, passing her to Deliza, who took her hand and pulled her in close to her.

"Sire," the lieutenant said as he approached.

"Lieutenant," Casimir replied, regaining his composure. "Is the area secure?"

"Yes, sire."

"And the data cores?"

"We are preparing to move them to a safe location as we speak."

"A safe location?" Casimir asked, becoming suspicious.

"Of course," the lieutenant replied. "With House Ta'Akar in ruin, and Prince Casimir and his heirs dead at the hands of terrorists, the responsibility for the safekeeping of the data cores now falls upon House Dahra." The lieutenant looked around at the bodies of the dead men. "It is a shame, really, that the once strong empire has fallen into such disrepair. Such acts of terrorism would not be possible..." The lieutenant's eyes returned to Casimir as he finished his sentence, "...under stronger leadership."

“What?” Deliza mumbled, confused. She looked at her father. “What’s he saying?”

“Sergeant, kill them all, using that man’s weapon,” the lieutenant said, pointing at the nearest dead intruder, “then return it to his hand.”

“What?” Deliza repeated, not believing what she was hearing. “Father? What’s going on?”

“It’s alright, Deliza,” he told her in hushed tones. He turned and put his arms around his daughters, accepting his fate. If they were to die, they would do so together. “I love you both, so much,” he told them, tears forming in his eyes. “Soon, we shall all be together, with your mother.”

One of the other guards pushed Yanni toward them, forcing them to all stand together in the middle of the corridor. Casimir turned back to face the sergeant who was picking up the dead attacker’s weapon. Yanni put his arms around Deliza, trying to stand tall in the face of certain death for her. Deliza began sobbing openly, as did Nalaya, even though she did not understand what was about to happen.

Casimir faced his executioners. “You shall all burn in hell for betraying your people.”

The lieutenant smiled. “You are correct, Casimir. We shall all most definitely burn in hell. However, you are not our people.”

Casimir turned his eyes toward the sergeant as the man raised the energy weapon and pointed it toward them. Casimir proudly looked the sergeant in the eyes as the man pulled the trigger.

A brilliant red flash appeared from the barrel of the weapon, nearly blinding Casimir and causing him to cringe. There was also a terrible whine, a piercing sound that seemed wholly unnatural, followed by a cry of pain.

Casimir opened his eyes again, and saw his would-be executioner, his hand deformed and melting, after his weapon had malfunctioned and emitted tremendous amounts of heat from the battery pack located in its grip.

A brilliant blue-white flash flooded the corridor, spilling in from the open doorways of adjacent rooms, as well as the exit into the courtyard from the end of the corridor.

Casimir lunged forward into the sergeant, who was still holding his melted hand and screaming in pain, knocking him backward. The lieutenant, whose head was turned in search of the source of the light did not see the attack coming, and took the full force of the falling sergeant, tripping over the dead body behind him, and toppling over. The sound of men hitting the ground outside, and the cacophony of weapons fire reverberated through the corridor, eclipsed only by the sound of Casimir's own voice as he yelled to his children, "Run!"

As the other Ghatazhak soldiers went charging outside to meet the new threat, Casimir scrambled over the sergeant's writhing body and grabbed at the lieutenant. The Ghatazhak officer reacted instantly, rolling away from Casimir and drawing his weapon as he climbed back to his feet. Casimir, also climbing to his feet, picked up the helmet of the fallen sergeant on his way up and swung it upward and to his left with all his might, striking the lieutenant in his face and bloodying his nose. The lieutenant stumbled backward for a moment, but recovered with all the speed and precision of a Ghatazhak. Before he could react, Casimir felt the lieutenant's boot strike his chest, knocking him backward.

Deliza also lunged at the lieutenant, screaming with all the ferocity of a Karuzari, but was knocked aside by the butt of the lieutenant's energy pistol.

The lieutenant smiled as Casimir scrambled to get back on his feet. He raised his weapon, taking aim at Casimir's head as he spoke in sinister tones. "No matter what you do, House Ta'Akar dies this night... and the data cores shall go to House Dahra."

Deliza rolled over and kicked at the lieutenant's leg as he fired, causing his body to dip slightly to the right. A high-pitched cry of pain was heard as another energy weapon fired from behind Casimir, striking the lieutenant in the face, instantly melting a hole through his face and superheating the tissues inside, causing them to explode out the back of his head through his helmet. The lieutenant's body dropped to the floor in grotesque fashion, pausing on its knees and then falling toward Deliza. She screamed as she rolled out of the way.

Casimir spun around and saw Yanni standing not three meters away, right where he had left him. The young Terran was holding an energy pistol in his hand, still aimed at the spot in the air where the Ghatazhak lieutenant's head had once been. Casimir gazed at Yanni for what seemed like an eternity, amazed that the young data core technician had just saved his life, and that of his family.

Then Casimir's eyes drifted downward, and his heart sank. His hearing disappeared as he ran forward, stumbling over the body of the sergeant, not even noticing that the wounded Ghatazhak soldier was reaching for the dead lieutenant's weapon. All that Casimir could see was the lifeless, smoldering body of his little green-eyed, golden-haired Nalaya.

More Ghatazhak began pouring into the corridor as the last of the Ghatazhak who they had once thought their saviors fell to the overwhelming assault. Casimir never heard their rescuers yelling for Yanni to put his weapon

down. He did not even hear the single shot that ended the life of the wounded sergeant who was raising his dead lieutenant's weapon to try and obey his lieutenant's final orders. All he could do was hold his dead child in his arms, and weep openly.

Commander Erbe and his men came to stop behind the bodies of the lieutenant and the sergeant. "Sire! Are you injured?"

Deliza looked at her father as he held her dead sister and wept. She turned to Commander Erbe, tears running down her cheeks. "Are you here to kill us as well?"

Commander Erbe looked at her, unsure of what to say.

"Go ahead then!" she continued, "You are Ghatazhak, are you not? Isn't that what you do?"

Commander Erbe slung his weapon back over his shoulder as he lowered himself down to one knee, bringing his face down to her level. "Princess Deliza," he began, in as calm a fashion as possible. "Those men were not Ghatazhak, not truly. They were of the Ybaran Legions. I am Commander Erbe. I was sent by Captain Navarro of the Avendahl, at the request of your father, to protect you. I regret that I have failed you in this way," he added gesturing at Nalaya's body. He pulled his energy pistol and offered it to Deliza, butt first. "I offer you my life as penance for my failure. I would be honored should you take it."

Deliza looked into the commander's eyes. They were strong and knowing. More importantly, they were sincere. She looked at the weapon he offered her, then at the sergeant standing next to the commander. The man showed no sign that he would prevent her from taking that weapon and killing the commander. She looked at the commander again. His eyes were still locked on hers, unwavering in his commitment.

She struggled to get to her feet, wiping her eyes as she stood. "Killing you will not bring my sister back," she began, sniffing. "She is with our mother, now." Deliza wiped her eyes again, finding a strength she had not known before. "Besides, I believe you and your men have work to do."

The commander nodded gently, amazed at what he saw in the eyes of the young princess. He had never met the young woman, but he was quite certain that the events of this night had changed her forever, just as it was about to change the history of Takara, and quite possibly the entire Pentaurus cluster. "Indeed," he agreed, placing his weapon back in its holster. "Sergeant, secure the area and ensure that the data cores are safe."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant responded.

The commander turned back to Deliza. "We should leave this place," he urged. "It is not safe. I can have you all on the decks of the Avendahl in minutes, along with the data cores if you desire."

"No," Deliza said firmly. "House Ta'Akar still stands, as do its leaders. We shall not run."

"Princess, please," the commander pleaded. "I understand your..."

"My daughter is correct," Casimir mumbled. He gently set Nalaya's body back down on the floor, kneeling beside her. "I made a mistake. A terrible mistake." He turned and looked at the commander, his eyes ablaze with anger and determination. "I should have killed the entire dragon."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Commander Atlee, chief of the watch for House Dahra burst into his lord's bedroom, with two heavily armed members of his team in tow. "My lord!" he called out as he crossed the expanse of finely crafted Sullienne carpeting that covered Lord Dahra's private chambers. "Pardon the intrusion..."

"What... What is the meaning of this? Why have..."

"Lord Dahra," the commander interrupted, knowing full well that the urgency of the situation negated the usual need to follow protocol. "Takaran security forces are at the gate! They are demanding your surrender. They threaten to storm the compound if you do..."

"What is going on?" his wife asked, still half asleep.

"That is preposterous!" Lord Dahra exclaimed as he rose from his bed. "What right do they think they have to..."

"They claim to have a warrant for your arrest, my lord," the commander explained further.

Lord Dahra looked at the commander, surprise on his face. "On what charges?"

"Treason," the commander replied, with equal surprise.

Lord Dahra looked at his wife, then back at the commander. "Our forces?"

"On alert. They are taking up defensive positions as we speak."

Lord Dahra grabbed his robe from the side chair and slipped it on. "You should get dressed," he told his wife. He turned back to the commander. "How many?"

"At least twenty armed men, most of them in full tactical gear."

"What about our reserve contingent?"

"They are in the underground bunkers, ready to respond."

"Tammer and Markly?"

"We can raise neither, secure or unsecure," the commander told him.

"Have you checked your sources?" Lord Dahra wondered. "News feeds?"

"You do not understand, my lord. *We* have been cut off... isolated from the whole of Takara."

Lord Dahra tried to remain calm, but it was obvious that the commander's last statement had been unexpected, even more so than the charges being brought against him. "This is Casimir's doing," he began as he headed for the door to his closet. "Stall them. Tell them I am dressing and will be available shortly. Meanwhile, move our reserve contingent into position, but do not reveal their presence until I give the word." He stopped at the entrance to his closet, turning back to face the commander. "House Dahra shall not be run over by House Ta'Akar!"

Inspector Blythe stood at the gates to House Dahra, located in the northern hills far outside of Answari. The main house stood in the middle of the Dahra lands, meaning that should Lord Dahra's thousands of subjects decide to actively defend their lord, the inspector and his tactical team would be severely outnumbered. Such had not been the case with either of Lord Dahra's accomplices. However, the Dahra family was second only to House Ta'Akar, and even then only by a slim margin.

“Something is happening, sir,” the inspector’s assistant said.

Inspector Blythe turned to look back at the main house, some forty meters up a long, curving driveway. Four men had come down the steps from the main entrance and were headed down the driveway toward them. Two of the four men were in full tactical combat gear, each of them more heavily armed than any of his own men. The third man appeared to be the same commander whom the inspector had spoken to nearly thirty minutes earlier, when they had first demanded entry. The fourth man was the one they sought, Lord Dahra himself, fully dressed in his house colors, as if he were on his way to a meeting of Parliament. The inspector smiled, a small chuckle escaping his lips. “Who the hell is he trying to impress? There are no news cameras within a hundred kilometers of this place.”

“Perhaps he wishes to look good for his day in court?” the inspector’s assistant suggested.

“Nobles,” the inspector mumbled, rolling his eyes.

Lord Dahra and his men walked up to the gate confidently, just as the inspector expected. Then the large gates split down the middle and began to part at a slow and steady rate, retracting into the massive stone walls that surrounded the compound.

The inspector was taken aback by the opening of the gates. He looked at the leader of the tactical teams standing not five meters away, next to the mobile command post. He signaled him to wait.

Lord Dahra and his men stopped five meters from the gates, after which Lord Dahra took two more steps forward. “I understand you wish to speak with me.”

Inspector Blythe looked at Lord Dahra and his men. “That is correct, sir.” The inspector began to walk toward Lord

Dahra, albeit at a very relaxed pace. “Actually, that is not entirely correct. I came here to arrest you. Conversation is more of a side effect, really. Not unexpected, but also not required.”

“So I have been told,” Lord Dahra replied, “and for treason, no less.”

“I fail to see the humor in this,” Inspector Blythe said, noting the lyrical nature of Lord Dahra’s delivery.

“The humor is that Casimir Ta’Akar believes that he can get away with such a stunt,” Lord Dahra explained. “The humor is that he thinks he, or anyone else, can push around House Dahra.”

“Regardless, Lord Dahra, I have a legal warrant for your arrest, and I intend to carry it out,” Inspector Blythe stated confidently.

Lord Dahra looked the inspector squarely in the eyes. “Need I remind you, my dear inspector, that you are on Dahran soil? Soil that belongs to House Dahra, and legally does not answer to Takara?”

“Need I remind you, my dear Lord Dahra, that you are allowed to hold such lands only under the laws of Takara, as well as the Charter of Torrence, under which you are bound to adhere to the warrant which I now hold.”

Lord Dahra waved his hand in dismissal. “The Charter of Torrence has not been enforced in centuries. Besides, had I wanted to take out House Ta’Akar, I would have done so with ease, especially since Casimir has liquidated so many of his assets in order to support his friends in the Sol sector.”

“I would advise you not to speak any further without proper representation,” the inspector warned.

“The hour is late, Inspector,” Lord Dahra said as he turned to head back to his home, “and I grow weary of this

conversation.”

“Are you refusing to abide by a legal warrant issued by a senior judge of Takara?” the inspector asked.

“I will deal with this in the morning,” Lord Dahra replied.

“You shall surrender yourself now, Lord Dahra, or my men shall take you by force!” the inspector insisted. He raised his hand to signal his tactical teams. The sound of sixteen men clad in tactical armor raising their weapons and activating their weapons’ charges could be heard from all directions.

“Sergeant!” Commander Atlee barked.

The sergeant barked orders of his own over his comm-set. A moment later, men appeared everywhere. Along the roofline of the main house. Along walkways. Popping up from hidden hatches in the perfectly manicured grass, and along the heavy stone walls. There were over twenty of them, all in addition to the ten security guards already in position. And all of these men wore the familiar battle armor of the Ghatazhak.

Lord Dahra turned back toward Inspector Blythe, casting a menacing look. “If you are going to try and give orders to the leader of House Dahra, it would help if you brought more men.”

Inspector Blythe did not react, or otherwise show any signs of weakness. He only replied, “I did.” He raised his hand again and snapped his fingers once, after which he closed his eyes tightly.

Six flashes of blue-white light appeared all around them, not more than ten meters above. A second later, twelve more flashes appeared further out, forming a circle around the main compound. The second set of flashes was perfectly timed, creating a distraction that had allowed six Ghatazhak from each of the six combat jump shuttles to quickly

descend to the surface and take up positions among Lord Dahra's forces.

Lord Dahra found himself crouching in fear in reaction to the sudden thunderous clap of displaced air, and the appearance of airborne forces overhead. He had not yet witnessed a jump flash, let alone eighteen of them, and in such close proximity. Now, there were six heavily armed combat shuttles hovering overhead, all of them with their weapons trained on Dahra's forces. In addition, there were twelve more Takaran fighters, a type that he had not seen since his youth, hovering just beyond his walls, their weapons similarly aimed. The effect of the jump flashes and the roar of all those engines around him as the eighteen combat spacecraft maintained hovering positions, in itself, was enough to make any man surrender. He looked around him in fear and near panic. His contingent of personal Ghatazhak soldiers, ones who had been obtained at great risk and expense, were of little use in the face of such forces. All around him, Ghatazhak had weapons trained on one another. His forces were strong, but they were outnumbered, even without the ships hovering overhead. If he did not surrender, the blood bath that followed would forever be associated with his family's name.

Lord Dahra looked at the inspector, who now had a Ghatazhak commander and his sergeant standing at his side. He forced himself to stand, assuming a proud stance once again. "Very well, Inspector. We shall leave this to the courts of Takara to decide."

"Order your men to stand down," Inspector Blythe ordered. "Including your illegal Ghatazhak."

* * *

"Admiral," the comm officer called over the intercom, "Captain Gullen of the Glendanon wishes to speak to you on a secure channel."

Admiral Dumar tapped his intercom control panel on his desk. "Put him through."

"One moment, sir," the comm officer replied. "I have video now. Sending it to your office."

Admiral Dumar's view screen came to life, revealing Captain Gullen, sitting in his cabin on board the Corinairan cargo ship Glendanon.

"Admiral Dumar," the captain greeted. "It is a pleasure to speak with you."

"The pleasure is mine, Captain. I take it you have arrived?"

"We have only just made orbit over Earth. Porto Santo will begin off-loading our cargo within the hour, after which we will depart for Tanna."

"So quickly?"

"Yes," Captain Gullen replied. *"We are on a very tight schedule. As Captain Scott anticipated, there is a great demand for propellant back in the Pentaurus sector. Prince Casimir and his business partners on Corinair are adamant about keeping a steady supply flowing into their newly constructed reformulation facility in the Darvano system."*

"I take it the new propellant source is creating quite a stir in the Pentaurus markets," Dumar said.

"Indeed it is," Captain Gullen agreed. "However, if the worlds of the Pentaurus cluster are to realize the maximum benefit of the jump drive technology, they will need this propellant, and they will need it at the more affordable prices that Casimir and his partners are offering. Once the flow stabilizes, prices will settle down and become steady."

Unfortunately, a few of the noble houses of Takara will suffer significant losses."

Even over the video feed, Admiral Dumar could sense the good captain's sarcasm. "I suspect they shall recover."

"Indeed. Admiral, the reason I am calling is because we have not received our daily communications from Takara. A comm-drone finds us each day, and exchanges messages. We received messages from Corinair, and other worlds in the Pentaurs cluster, but not from the Takar system. From what we have heard, no one has received anything from the Takar system for nearly a day, not even worlds within the cluster, and those comm-drones run hourly."

"Yes, we are aware of the situation," the admiral said. "We too receive hourly communications from the Pentaurs sector. It seems as if the Takar system has broken off contact with the rest of the galaxy for some reason."

"What possible reason could there be for such an interruption?" Captain Gullen wondered.

"I can think of several," Admiral Dumar said, "none of which are pleasant, I'm afraid."

"To be honest, I was hoping for a more encouraging response, Admiral."

"I wish I had one to offer. Rest assured, Captain, should I learn anything further, I shall make sure you are notified as soon as possible. In the meantime, I suspect it is best that we all continue to go about our duties as usual."

"Of course, of course," Captain Gullen agreed. *"Thank you for your time, Admiral."*

"It was my pleasure, Captain." The admiral switched off his view screen, then pressed a button on his intercom. "Comms, how many jump comm-drones are on base?"

"Currently three, sir," the comm officer replied. *"One is scheduled to make a run to Tanna and back in the next hour."*

The other two are on standby."

"Assign one for a dedicated point-to-point run to the Takar system. Personal message to Prince Casimir of House Ta'Akar. Urgent, eyes only. From Admiral Dumar, Karuzara. Message reads: Usual comms package not received. Requesting immediate situation report. End message."

"Understood," the comm officer replied. *"Wait time for return message?"*

"Four hours."

* * *

Prince Casimir sat in his office, staring out the window at the lands that surrounded his home. He had not slept in nearly thirty hours, and his thoughts were a jumble of fatigue and emotion... mostly guilt. Last night, in the course of five minutes, everything had changed, just as it had back on Haven so many months ago. He wished there was something that he could do to change it all, to turn back the hands of time and redirect his fate, as well as the fate of those he had loved, but it was far too late. Nothing he did from this point forward would bring them back. Nothing. All he could do was to ensure that their deaths would not be meaningless, that something good would be revealed once the dark storm that was about to engulf them all passed them by. Something had to remain, something better. It was his responsibility to make that happen. It was clear to him now, that he had failed.

He would not fail again.

The door opened behind him, yet he did not turn away from the window. He could hear his remaining daughter's footsteps, lighter than anyone else's, as well as the sound of

clothing as it swayed from side to side as she walked. She was all that was left. His only reason for living.

"Father?" Deliza called softly from the other side of his desk. "Do you know what you are going to say?" His back still to her, Casimir held up his data pad. She could see the text on the screen. "You already wrote something?"

"I could not," he admitted in an unsteady voice.

"Then who?" she wondered.

"Major Bellen," he replied, "with help from Mister Hiller."

"Yanni?"

"The young man has a way with words." He turned to his left, vaguely looking over his shoulder at her. "Is it time?"

"They are ready whenever you are, Father," she replied.

Casimir's voice began to break. "I don't know if I can," he admitted, fighting back his own tears.

"You must," Deliza urged in gentle fashion, taking care not to push him too far. "Rumors are already spreading around the planet and beyond. All of Takara waits to hear from their leader."

"I am not worthy of the position," Casimir insisted. His voice was weak and without spirit or confidence. "How can I protect all of Takara, when I cannot even protect my own family?"

"You fought for the good of Takara *despite* the risk to your family," Deliza reminded him. "Does that not prove that you are worthy? You chose to fight your battles by rule of law, rather than by sending assassins in the night. Does that not also prove you are worthy?"

Casimir turned to look at his daughter's face. "Where do you find the strength, Deliza? Your mother, your sister... your entire life has been turned upside down..."

"I am where I am supposed to be," Deliza told him. "As are you. As to the strength, believe me, Father, inside I am a

mess. I have been crying all morning, but the time for crying is no more. Now is the time for strength. Now it is time for you to lead us.”

Casimir looked in Deliza’s eyes. He could see the strength of her mother, as well as the gentle nature of her younger sister. More importantly, he could see a wisdom and strength that was all her own. That was enough for him.

“Very well,” he said. He rose from his seat and moved toward the exit. He paused and looked at her again, giving her a long hug. “If I lose you, I will be finished,” he whispered.

“Then don’t lose me,” she told him as she looked up at him and smiled.

Casimir took her by the hand and headed out of his office into the corridor. They were met by a team of four Ghatazhak, who immediately fell into a four-point formation around them, escorting them down the corridor and into the main room, where the cameras of all the news agencies in the Takar system awaited.

* * *

“How are your training programs going, Captain Taylor?” Admiral Dumar asked as he picked at his salad.

“As well as can be expected,” Cameron replied.

“Not exactly an encouraging response,” the admiral said as he took another bite.

“The volunteers are doing their best,” she explained, “but they have a lot to learn, and very little time in which to learn it.”

“Will they be up to the task of running our ships?”

“We have enough people that are either EDF trained, or have sufficient education or experience to develop the

necessary skills in short order. Based on our last evaluations, both ships should have at least one good shift. The other shifts will take a bit more time."

"Since we do not plan on sending either ship out for more than a day or two, and most engagements should last only minutes, I suspect one crew each should be enough for the time being," the admiral commented.

"Assuming, of course, that none of our best people get killed in action," Cameron pointed out.

"Well, the Celestia is still months from being back in service, so you still have time to work miracles, Captain."

"We'll do our best, Admiral," Cameron promised.

Admiral Dumar enjoyed the informality of meeting with his commanding officers while dining, as it seemed to put them more at ease, allowing them to speak their mind. At least, that had always been the case when he was in service to the empire. The Terrans, however, seemed more willing to speak their mind to a superior officer than most, which was fine with the admiral. He turned to Nathan, sitting at the opposite end of the table from him. "I trust repairs of the Aurora are going well, Captain Scott?"

"I think we're making adequate progress," Nathan replied. "I doubt that my cheng would agree with me, however."

"Oh?"

"He's always complaining that the Karuzara fabrication schedulers are continuously putting his fabrication needs on lowest priority. I've assured him that he is mistaken."

"Actually, I would not be surprised if that were the case more often than not," Admiral Dumar corrected. "After all, since receiving the Celestia's antimatter cores, the Aurora is operational, and combat ready, especially now that her topside plasma cannon is about to go operational again."

"Agreed, however, I do question the prioritizing of the Karuzara's guns over the Aurora's. After all, we are expected to conduct four more assaults over the next few weeks."

"All of which the Aurora is perfectly capable of handling in her current condition," the admiral insisted. "However, I will review the fabricator schedules and see if we can't give a little more consideration to your cheng's requests."

"I'm sure he would appreciate that, Admiral."

"Have you spoken with your father recently?"

"I have," Nathan replied, "just this morning, in fact."

"Has he heard anything about the results of the nanite therapies?"

"It is still too early to tell how tolerant the people of Earth will be with the discomfort caused by the nanite therapy," Nathan said, "but as expected, now that there are ample supplies, the people of Earth are lining up for treatment. Doctor Chen believes that the amount of data they'll be able to collect about the effect of the Corinairan nanites on Terrans will help them solve the riddle as to why their nanites cause us so much discomfort, despite our identical physiologies."

"I find it curious that none of the Ghatazhak have suffered any ill effects due to nanite therapy," Commander Telles commented. "We have even begun administering prophylactic doses prior to battle. However, we *have* seen a mixture of reactions from the Terrans who we are training to take over the security of Earth."

"To the nanites?" Cameron wondered. "Why are you giving them nanites?"

"Ghatazhak physical training is extremely intense," Commander Telles explained. "Injuries are common, some of them quite severe."

"What do you mean by 'mixture'?" Admiral Dumar asked.

"Everything from extreme pain causing unconsciousness, to no reaction at all."

"Okay, now that *is* curious," Cameron agreed. "Why couldn't I have been one of the lucky ones?"

"I'm sure Jessica would say the same," Nathan commented.

"I trust you are not damaging the Terran volunteers faster than they can be acquired," Admiral Dumar said.

"That would be impossible," Commander Telles assured the admiral. "The Terrans are volunteering by the tens of thousands. We have already increased our first class from one thousand trainees to five thousand. We would take more, but I cannot afford to dedicate any more of my men to the training effort. We are still being called upon to conduct surface assaults against Jung ground forces, after all."

"*Admiral, Comms,*" the comm officer called over the intercom in the admiral's dining room.

"Go ahead," Admiral Dumar replied, wiping his mouth with his napkin.

"Comm-drone one four has returned from Takara."

"Did Casimir respond to our request?"

"Yes, sir. The drone also received a transmission. A public announcement from House Ta'Akar. It was directed at all the worlds in the Takar system."

"Send the situation report to my data pad, and send the broadcast to the view screen here," the admiral instructed.

"Yes, sir."

The view screen on the wall of the admiral's dining room switched on, revealing a message identification header and time stamp. The image changed to that of a large room that Nathan recognized as the grand foyer to Casimir's residence, which he had visited on more than one occasion

during the Aurora's refit after the battle of Takara. There was a podium in the middle of the shot, with the crest of House Ta'Akar at the center of it.

Prince Casimir entered the shot, moving slowly and without looking at the cameras as he stepped up to the podium. Nathan was immediately struck by one thought. *Something is wrong.*

Casimir looked up at the camera. His face was sad, his eyes full of despair that he was trying desperately to hide. *"People of Takara. I stand before you this day for one purpose; to apologize. I apologize that I took so long to develop the courage to take down my brother and dismantle his illegal empire. I apologize that I lost faith in that goal and abandoned it for so long, even after so many had died in the effort. Lastly, I apologize for the grave misjudgment that I made once I had taken my rightful place as leader of Takara. I should not have handed power over to Parliament, for the nobles who were made even more powerful than ever by the illegal reign of Caius Ta'Akar could not be trusted to put the good of the people before that of their own interests. I shall not make such mistakes again."*

Casimir looked as if he were about to break down on camera, as he struggled to maintain his composure. *"For the cost of such mistakes are far too high. Too high for me, too high for my family, and too high for Takara."*

Again, Casimir fought to maintain control, as he continued with his speech. *"Last night, forces composed of trained assassins, as well as Ghatazhak soldiers, attacked my home, killing nearly all of my security forces..."* Casimir's voice began to tremble. *"...as well as a member of my family."* He paused long enough to clear his throat, and wipe a tear from his cheek. *"Evidence indicates that these illegally obtained forces were hired by, and were under the*

control of, House Dahra, House Tammer, and House Markly. The leaders of all three houses are now in custody, and shall face the charges of treason, conspiracy to commit an act of aggression against another member of Parliament, and murder. These are serious charges, and despite the heinous nature of these charges, the accused shall have their day in court, according to the laws of Takara and the Charter of Torrence. This trial shall be carried out under the watchful eyes of all of Takara, as well as the entire Pentaurus cluster, so that all who witness it shall know that despite their efforts, Takara shall not again become an empire. Takara shall forever remain as it was conceived, a democracy, ruled by laws applied equally, and free of corruption. That is what I fought for, that is what so many brave men and women fought and died for, and that is what shall be."

Casimir looked out beyond the cameras, as if looking to the farthest reaches of the broadcast, a renewed strength filling his eyes. *"To this end, I am exercising my right as the senior member of Parliament, and the leader of the founding house of Takara, to retake control of the Takar system, and all its worlds. In order to ensure the safety of every man, woman, and child during this uncertain time, I am also declaring martial law."*

A flood of questions began, with reporters yelling over one another to be heard. As the sound of the broadcast began to fade, Nathan turned to look at Admiral Dumar, whose attention was focused on his data pad. The admiral looked up, with profound sadness in his eyes. "Nalaya Ta'Akar was killed in the attack."

* * *

Jessica and Naralena sat at the large conference table in Ellyus Barton's real estate office, studying the display that formed the entire top surface of his desk. Laid out before them were numerous documents, all digitally displayed, yet still appearing as if they were physical documents lying on the table.

"This is the main headquarters for the Jung forces in the Tau Ceti system," Ellyus said, pointing at the satellite image of Cetia. He tapped the image of the building with two fingers, causing the building to pop up out of the image and take on three dimensions. He rotated the building around from side to side, showing each face to his guests. "As you can see, there is nothing to distinguish it from other Jung facilities, other than perhaps a larger than usual landing pad on the roof. However, that is not a reliable indication since most buildings have landing pads in Cetia, as they are used by all manner of shuttles. Emergency response, deliveries, maintenance, even passenger shuttles routinely utilize such pads."

"How did you determine it was there?" Jessica asked.

"Over time, you see Jung military shuttles coming and going. Eventually I narrowed it down to this neighborhood and, after watching it for a few weeks, it became rather obvious. They are not really trying to hide its location, they are just not publicizing it. I honestly do not think it is intentional, I just believe they see no reason to advertise their resources to the general public."

"Odd," Jessica commented, "from what we've seen of the Jung, they like to put on a show... make sure everyone knows who is in charge."

"I suspect that is more of an individual character trait of the local administrator or commander than it is an empire-wide Jung directive," Ellyus explained. "One of the things

you have to take into consideration when examining the behavior of the Jung Empire is the distances between systems. It is impossible to rule such a wide area directly. Even using faster-than-light communications drones, it takes months, sometimes years for messages to travel between systems. Because of this, the Ton-Gar bestow total authority to the person in charge of the system."

"The Ton-Gar?" Jessica asked, unfamiliar with the term.

"Loosely translated, it means 'ruling class' or 'top leaders'."

"So, there are more than one of them?"

"Yes. As I understand it, the Ton-Gar is like a board of directors," Ellyus continued. "It is composed of the senior members of the original twelve branches of the Jung family tree."

"How do you know all of this?" Naralena wondered. "I would have expected your focus to be more on military assets."

"You can never know too much about your enemy," Jessica said.

"Indeed," Ellyus agreed. "In the beginning, I did focus on such things, but after the Jung settled in, they began to not only teach the Cetian population their language, but also their history and politics. Slowly but surely, they began to convince the Cetians that the Jung Empire brought peace and prosperity to those who welcomed them."

"That's the key phrase, isn't it," Jessica said. "Those who welcomed them."

"Precisely. However, no one knows what the consequences are for *not* welcoming them."

"I can answer that one," Jessica replied. "Boom. Big fucking boom."

Ellyus Barton looked quizzically at Jessica.

"When we liberated Earth, they tried to destroy it. I'm not talking destruction of infrastructure and the like. I'm talking about glassing the planet from orbit."

Ellyus looked at her for a moment. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Hell, yes. Millions died on Earth. Nearly a quarter of the population."

"My God," Ellyus exclaimed. "I had no idea."

Jessica looked at Ellyus, noticing that he was sincerely shaken by the news of the near destruction of his homeworld. "Did you have family back on Earth?" she asked.

"No," he replied solemnly. "None of us did. That is why we were chosen for this line of work. We were to make lives for ourselves here, and to forget about our lives on Earth."

"Makes sense," Jessica replied. "That's probably why I was turned down for deep-cover work. I come from a large family."

Ellyus nodded his understanding, his mind still trying to imagine the damage the Earth must have sustained. "Perhaps the attempt to destroy Earth was a decision made by the local force commander?"

"More likely it's SOP. When we attacked their fleet in the Alpha Centauri B system, they took out Kent."

"They glassed it as well?"

"No, they took it *out*. They nudged their barely functioning battleship toward it, then detonated their antimatter cores as it made contact. It was enough to crack the planet open. The internal volcanic pressures inside did the rest, at least that's what our science people believe. The point is, Kent no longer exists. There's nothing left but a debris belt that stretches halfway around Rigel. And the people of Kent had *nothing* to do with the attack. They

didn't even know what was going on, since we didn't land troops there like we did on Copora."

"You captured 61 Cygni as well?"

"Yup. We're working our way through every system within twenty light years. Since that's the fastest ships we've seen, we're assuming that doing so will buy the Earth a minimum of one year of recovery time."

"I only recently heard rumors that the Jung had ships capable of such speeds. They are said to be building such ships here, in the Tau Ceti system, in the Alliyana shipyards over Sorenson."

"They have shipyards here?" Jessica wondered, surprised by his statement. "None of our recon flights have detected any shipyards."

"You have recon flights in this system?"

"We have Falcons cold-coasting through the system on a regular basis, same as all the other systems within twenty light years of Sol," Jessica explained.

"Falcons?"

"New ships, sort of," Jessica told him. "Long story."

Ellyus nodded. "Well, I'm not surprised that your Falcons did not detect them. Unless one of the new ships is departing, the shipyard would just appear to be another of Sorenson's fifteen moons. Alliyana is one of the smallest of them, more of a captured asteroid than a moon. No atmosphere. The space port is contained within. It is a series of chambers of varying sizes, capable of manufacturing up to four ships at the same time."

"What size ships?"

"No bigger than a frigate. The facility was originally created to build interplanetary transports, in order to reconnect the three inhabited worlds of Tau Ceti. Once

enough of them were built, Alliyana turned to building gunboats and the occasional frigate.”

“I wonder how many of these facilities the Jung actually have that we aren’t aware of?” Jessica wondered.

“I have heard rumors that more exist, but I have never been able to verify that information.”

“They must, especially considering the number of ships they already have. They had to be built somewhere, right?”

“How many ships do they have?” Ellyus wondered.

“At least one hundred that we’ve actually verified.”

“How many ships did you say this ‘Alliance’ has?”

“I didn’t,” Jessica replied. “Right now, we only have two full-sized warships, both of them about the size of a Jung cruiser, and one of them is in dry dock for a while.”

Ellyus shook his head, looking quite confused. “That does not make sense. To have liberated 61 Cygni, Alpha Centauri, and to have delivered you and your friend here, you would either need several more ships, or you would need to have been fighting this war for many years, in which case we surely would have heard about it here in Cetia.”

“A little over a year,” Jessica told him. “Actually, more like half that, since we didn’t get back to Sol until about six months ago, I think.”

Ellyus looked even more confused than before. As he tried to reconcile the information she was giving him, his expression began to change further. His hands slid in relaxed fashion off the table and into his lap, as he leaned back slightly in his chair. “Back from where?” he asked as his right hand crept forward under the table in almost imperceptible fashion. “Liberating one of those systems? Were these preemptive strikes?”

Ellyus Barton’s right hand came out from under the table with considerable quickness, producing a small Cetian

energy pistol. Jessica, who was looking at the images on the table display at the moment, caught the Cetian real estate agent's rapid movement out of the corner of her eye and instantly reacted, leaning slightly to her left just beside the pistol's line of fire. At the same time, her right hand came up from the table with even greater speed, grabbing the side of the pistol and twisting it to her right, away from her and out of the old man's grip.

Jessica looked at the pistol, finding its design unfamiliar. "What the hell are you doing, Ellyus?"

"Who are you people?" he demanded, holding his right hand. "Where are you really from, and who is this 'Alliance' that you speak of?"

"We *are* from Earth, Ellyus, just like you."

"Earth did not have the resources to do all that you claim to have done. Not forty years ago and not today."

"Things have changed drastically over the last couple years," Jessica assured him.

"You're lying," Ellyus insisted. "About which, I am not sure. Either about the number of ships or the time period, because nothing can go that fast."

"That's where you're wrong," Jessica assured him. She looked at him for a moment. "What's your real name? Your Earth name?"

Ellyus looked at Jessica and then Naralena. "Tom. Tom Ryan."

"Where were you born, Tom?"

"I don't know."

"How can you not know where you were born?"

"I was an orphan. I was adopted when I was very young."

"I thought you said you didn't have any ties on Earth?"

"My adoptive parents died in a plane crash when I was twenty. That's when I enlisted."

“Rough.” Jessica set the weapon down on the table next to her, close enough that she could reach it, but far enough away from Ellyus so that he could not. She sat down and leaned back in her chair and looked him in the eyes. “Look, Tom...”

“Please, do not call me by that name,” he interrupted. “I am Ellyus Barton now.”

“Okay, Ellyus,” she continued. “What I’m about to tell you is pretty unbelievable, and I’m probably not supposed to be telling you any of it, but if I don’t, you’re never going to believe us. You see, we have a device called a jump drive, and it can jump a ship over a considerable distance in the blink of an eye.”

“How considerable a distance?”

“We’re talking light years,” she told him. “It depends on the ship, really. Generally, big ships can jump about ten to twenty light years in a single jump, but require hours to recharge in order to jump again, whereas smaller ships, like the Falcons, can jump a tenth of that distance at a time, but can do so repeatedly for hundreds of jumps.”

Ellyus said nothing, only stared at Jessica in disbelief.

“Long story short, we can go anywhere we want, in almost no time at all.”

Ellyus looked at her a bit longer. “You don’t really expect me to believe this, do you?”

“It’s true,” she insisted. She pointed at Naralena. “She’s from a world called Volon, about a thousand light years away.”

Ellyus looked at Naralena. “A thousand light years, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Get back home much?” he asked.

“Not often, no.”

Ellyus sighed. "Okay, let's say, for argument's sake, that I believe you. If you can move about so easily, why haven't you simply jumped from system to system and taken out all the Jung ships?"

"It's not all that easy," Jessica explained. "Like I said, the Jung don't like to leave anything of value behind when they lose a system, so we have to take them by surprise, with enough firepower to destroy their battle groups before they can glass the worlds they are holding."

"And the Jung love large battle groups," Ellyus realized.

"Yes, they do," Jessica agreed. "It isn't easy to take out a battleship, my friend, let alone a battle platform. That's why one of our ships is in dry dock for a few months. She got pounded pretty good in her last engagement with a battle platform. That's why we are limiting ourselves to clearing out a twenty light year safe zone around Sol. We're trying to buy time to get more Alliance forces to Sol."

"They don't have jump drives?"

"They do now," Jessica replied. "Still, it takes time to retrofit their existing ships, and things are a little shaken up back there as well. They also just defeated an 'evil empire' of sorts."

"So, our ships, or should I say 'ship', can take out an entire battle platform?"

"Like I said, it isn't easy," Jessica assured him. "Without the element of surprise, it would be impossible. Even with it, if we don't take that platform out within the first minute, our chances of victory go down drastically."

"Why are you here then?" Ellyus wondered. "Surely no information that I can provide will assist you in taking down a battle platform?"

"We're here, because Tau Ceti has, by far, the largest population of any system within that twenty light year safe

zone I spoke of. Every other system has only a single inhabited world. This one has three, each of which rivals Earth in population and industrial capacity. Hell, right now they probably surpass that of Earth. Normally, we put boots on the ground and close air support in the skies at the same time, in order to neutralize the Jung forces on the ground so that they cannot punish the locals. But with three worlds, that becomes far more tricky. Copora had considerable anti-aircraft defenses, as well as guns capable of reaching targets in orbit overhead."

"I thought you had recon ships passing through on a regular basis?"

"Yes, but because of the amount of interplanetary traffic in this system, it's too risky for our recon ships to make passes close enough to determine the surface defenses of all three worlds, as well as the strength of their ground forces. *That* is why we are here."

"I see," Ellyus said. "And how do you propose to get this information *back* to the Alliance? Even if we possessed the proper equipment, would it not take years for the message to reach them?"

"Originally, we were supposed to obtain what information we could, then return to the pickup point for extraction. Unfortunately, our vessel was destroyed."

"Ah, then that *was* you, in the lake?"

"Yes," Jessica acknowledged.

"Again, the question remains."

"Not really," Jessica said. "If we fail to return, the Alliance will carry out their plans with the intelligence they have. Unfortunately, that may result in not only additional losses for the Alliance, but possibly thousands of innocent Cetian lives as well."

Ellyus stared at the display table for several seconds, seemingly transfixed by the images. Jessica looked at him, wondering if he was going to speak. Finally, she waved her hand in front of his face. "Ellyus?"

"Sorry," he replied, "I was just thinking about everything."

"For I second, I thought we lost you again."

"No, I don't believe so," he replied. "Anyway, you need not worry about the Cetian surface defenses. Other than anti-aircraft systems intended to protect surface military bases, we have no other defenses. Certainly nothing that could reach your ships in orbit. That is why the Jung keep two full battle groups in the system. If you destroy them, you shall have control of the system."

"And what about the Jung forces on the ground?" Jessica wondered.

"There are many, that is true," Ellyus admitted. "However, without support from the Jung ships, they will not be able to fight for more than a few weeks before their provisions are depleted. A starving, thirsty man cannot fight."

"What about the Cetian people? Will they provide aide to the Jung ground forces?"

"Some may," Ellyus admitted. "As I said, many favor the Jung's presence, as they have brought considerable prosperity to all the worlds of Tau Ceti. However, I have always felt that the majority of the Cetians who openly support the Jung do so in word only. When the fighting starts, they will most likely change their opinions, especially if your ships are able to defeat those of the Jung."

"Exactly how many troops are we talking about?" Jessica asked.

“That I shall have to determine,” Ellyus confessed. “It has been some time since I have updated this intelligence. As I said before, I had all but given up hope that any of this would ever be of use.”

* * *

“Jump flash,” Mister Navashee reported from the Aurora’s sensor station. “Scout Two has returned.”

“Incoming message,” Ensign Souza announced. “Scout Two reports KKV’s three and four are in position and ready to deploy.”

“All KKV’s are ready for launch,” Lieutenant Delaveaga reported from the Aurora’s tactical station. “Latest recon shows no change in the orbital plots of either target, Captain.”

“Time to attack?” Nathan inquired.

“Two minutes, twenty seconds to first window,” Luis replied.

“Mister Riley?” Nathan called.

“Attack jump one, plotted and locked,” Mister Riley replied from the Aurora’s navigation station, directly in front of Nathan. “We’re ready to jump.”

“Very well,” Nathan replied. “Set general quarters. Notify Scouts One and Two we are go for the first attack window.”

“Aye, sir,” Ensign Souza acknowledged, as the alert lighting activated, painting the edges of the overheads and decks of the Aurora’s bridge a faint red.

Nathan listened as the call to general quarters went out all over the ship. The attack on the Jung forces in the Sigma Draconis system was planned and expected, so the crew was already standing by, awaiting the official word that the

attack was about to commence. Within a few seconds, the Aurora's many departments began to report their readiness.

"Scouts One and Two are pulling away," Mister Navashee reported. "Scouts are jumping."

"All weapons are deployed, charged, and ready for action," Lieutenant Delaveaga reported.

"All departments report general quarters, Captain," Ensign Souza announced.

"Very well," Nathan responded. In this attack, just as in the previous ones, there was little for him to do. His crew knew their jobs, and they knew the plan of attack. Assuming everything went as planned, all he had to do was give the word, and then sit back and enjoy the show.

"Coming up on the attack window in twenty seconds," Luis reported.

"Flight ops reports Falcons are in position and ready to jump on schedule," Ensign Souza announced.

"KKVs should be launching in three," Luis added.

"Jump point in twenty seconds," Mister Riley reported.

"Two....."

Nathan glanced at the battle timing display on the lower right corner of the main view screen, as the various timers counted down. Each timer showed the time remaining to each ship's next action.

"One....."

Above the battle clocks, in the upper right portion of the Aurora's spherical, wraparound view screen, a tactical map of the Sigma Draconis system—more specifically the small, rocky, hellish world known as Kalita—would show the position of every ship, friend or foe. Not only would it show their predicted positions, but it would indicate whether or not those positions were verified.

"Launch."

Nathan looked back at the tactical map, his eyes on the six-armed icon representing the Jung battle platform following Kalita at one of the parent star's gravitationally stable points.

"Five seconds to KKV impacts," Luis reported.

"Jumping in ten," Mister Riley added.

"Three.....two.....one.....impacts."

"Jumping in three....."

Nathan watched the tactical map as the icons for both the battle platform and the battleship both began to flash, indicating predicted KKV strikes and probable destruction of the targets.

"Two....."

They would not know for sure that the targets were destroyed until after they jumped into the system to engage the remaining Jung ships.

"One.....jumping."

The Aurora's jump flash washed over the bridge, subdued greatly by the automatic filters in their main view screen.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

Nathan looked at the view screen. Along the far right edge of the screen, about sixty degrees to starboard, he could make out the massive explosions of the battle platform. His eyes glanced at the tactical map, just as the flashing icon for the battle platform changed from the six-armed icon to a much larger collection of dots, indicating the destroyed platform's debris field.

"Target charlie one, dead ahead," Mister Navashee announced. "Target alpha one has been destroyed."

"Locking all forward tubes on first cruiser," Luis reported.

"Weapons free," Nathan ordered.

"Weapons free, aye," Luis replied.

"Target bravo one has been destroyed," Mister Navashee added.

"Firing triplets on all forward tubes," Luis announced.

Nathan saw the icon for the battleship change as well, as the red-orange balls of plasma left the Aurora's forward tubes and streaked forward, on their way toward the first unsuspecting Jung cruiser.

"Plasma cannon locked on charlie two," Luis reported. "Firing."

"Jump flashes," Mister Navashee said. "Scouts One and Two are attacking the frigates."

"Turning onto target charlie two," Mister Chiles announced.

"Five seconds to jump two," Mister Chiles reported.

The image of the first Jung cruiser began to slide upward on the view screen, as flashes of white-yellow light reported the impact of their plasma torpedoes.

"Multiple torpedo impacts," Mister Navashee reported.

"Jumping in three....."

"Charlie one has lost all port shields..."

"Two....."

"Charlie one is breaking up," Mister Navashee added as secondary explosions began to deform the cruiser on the view screen.

"One....."

"Retargeting plasma cannon on target charlie two," Luis announced.

"Jumping."

Nathan looked at the tactical display again. As the jump flash washed over the bridge, the icon representing them disappeared, then reappeared just beyond the icon for the first cruiser, as it changed to a debris field as well.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley announced.

"Pitching up," Mister Chiles added.

The image of the second Jung cruiser that had just appeared at the top of the main view screen began to slide down toward its center as the Aurora's helmsman raised the ship's nose to bring her torpedo tubes onto the new target.

"Targets foxtrot one and two have both been destroyed," Mister Navashee reported.

"Locking forward tubes on second cruiser," Luis reported.

"Scouts have jumped. They should be engaging the other two frigates now," Mister Navashee continued. "Multiple jump flashes low over Kalita. I'm showing twelve Falcons engaging surface targets."

"Torpedoes locked," Luis reported. "Firing triplets on all forward tubes."

Again, red-orange balls of highly charged plasma left the Aurora, bound for the second Jung cruiser only a few kilometers away.

"Charlie two is maneuvering," Mister Navashee warned. "She's raising shields, and she's firing."

"Pitching to track charlie two," the helmsman assured.

"Incoming missiles," Mister Navashee reported. "Impact in ten seconds."

"Locking plasma cannon and all four plasma torpedo cannons on charlie two," Luis said.

"Escape jump ready," Mister Riley reported.

"Firing plasma cannon. Firing plasma torpedo cannons," Luis continued. "Torpedoes away."

"Impact in five," Mister Navashee warned.

"Jumping," Mister Riley announced, dispensing with the usual three-second countdown.

Nathan watched the tactical display as the jump flash again washed over them. The icons representing the last two frigates began to flash, indicating that Scout ships One

and Two should have both engaged and destroyed their last two planned targets. The icon representing the cruiser that had fired on them also began to flash.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Coming about," Mister Chiles added.

"Scanning the area of target charlie two," Mister Navashee said as he stared at his sensor displays.

Nathan continued to watch the flashing icons representing the last three Jung ships left in the Sigma Draconis system.

"Target charlie two, destroyed," Mister Navashee reported as the flashing cruiser icon changed to a debris field icon. "Jump flashes, over Kalita."

"Incoming messages from Scouts One and Two," Ensign Souza reported. "All frigates have been destroyed."

The last two flashing icons changed to debris field icons on the tactical display.

"Turn complete," Mister Chiles reported.

"Jumping to low orbit over Kalita," Mister Riley added. "Jumping in three....."

Nathan felt a wave of relief wash over him.

"Two....."

This was the third such attack on Jung forces in nearby systems, and it had gone just as smoothly as the previous two.

"One....."

Thus far, none of their ships had taken any damage, and their crews had suffered no casualties.

"Jumping."

They had lost Ghatazhak on the two previous engagements, but according to Commander Telles, the losses had been less than he had anticipated.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported as the Aurora's jump flash faded.

Nathan looked at the main view screen again as the reddish image of Kalita appeared along the bottom edge of the main view screen.

"Executing roll," Mister Chiles reported.

The image of Kalita began to move along the bottom edge of the screen sliding around to the right, up the side, and across the top of the screen, as the Aurora rolled over to bring her main guns into position. The planet now above his head was an ugly reddish-brown color, with no visible water on the surface, and no polar ice caps. He could not imagine what life on the surface of Kalita could be like.

"Scans show all surface defenses have been neutralized," Mister Navashee reported.

"Primary target will be in range in ten seconds," Luis announced. "Locking quads on primary target."

The view from one of the quad rail gun's targeting camera appeared in a window on the main view screen. The image magnified until the entire Jung military base on the surface of Kalita filled the window.

"Quads locked on target. Ready to fire," Luis reported.

"Open fire," Nathan ordered calmly.

"Firing quads."

The aerial image of the Jung base on the surface became obscured by a gray, grainy fog, as thousands of rail gun rounds rained down upon the target. The image was quickly engulfed by a rising cloud of reddish-brown dust that swirled in chaotic patterns as the rail gun rounds continued to pummel the base. After only thirty seconds, the firing stopped.

"Target destroyed," Mister Navashee reported.

"Green deck," Nathan ordered.

"Green deck, aye," Ensign Souza acknowledged.

Nathan continued to watch as the winds on the surface of Kalita slowly blew the dust cloud away, revealing a massive crater surrounded by a wide ejecta field, all marking the place where a Jung base once stood. As many as one thousand Jung soldiers had just died, possibly even ten times that number, but it had little effect on him.

"Combat jumpers are away," Ensign Souza reported.

"They're jumping," Mister Navashee added. "Multiple jump flashes on the surface," he continued. "Near the base, near the mining facility, and near the worker encampments." He paused for a moment as he counted. "Total of twenty-eight flashes, Captain. All our forces are on the ground."

"Any ships trying to depart the surface?" Nathan wondered.

"Negative, sir," Mister Navashee answered. "However, Scouts One and Two *are* moving into position to enforce the departure quarantine."

"Anything further out we might have missed?" Nathan added.

"Negative, Captain," Luis replied. "The threat board shows clear. Second wave of Falcons is taking up BARCAP positions now."

"Very well," Nathan said. "Stand down from general quarters, and set ready condition two."

"Stand down from general quarters and set ready two, aye," Ensign Souza acknowledged.

Nathan rotated his command chair around to face aft. "This is getting too easy," he said to Lieutenant Delaveaga as he rose from his seat and headed aft. "You have the conn, Lieutenant."

Luis smiled. "Aye, sir."

“Patch the feed from the Ghatazhak mobile command post to my ready room,” he instructed Ensign Souza on his way out.

“Aye, sir.”

Nathan stepped into his ready room, closing the hatch behind him. He moved around his desk and sat down, activating the large view screen on the forward bulkhead over the sofa that Lieutenant Commander Nash loved to stretch out on. A few clicks on his remote, and he had what he wanted... the views from every single Ghatazhak helmet camera currently fighting on the surface of Kalita. It would be a gruesome spectacle to witness, but Nathan felt he had to watch. The last three engagements had gone so well, that he feared losing contact with the brutality of their job. He hoped the images from the Ghatazhak helmet cameras would serve to remind him. What he saw took him by surprise.

The Ghatazhak helmet cameras were not sending him images of combat, but rather of rescue. Thousands of men being held in work camps on the hellish surface of Kalita. The men were dirty, with weather-worn skin and tattered clothing. Their homes were sturdy, but simple and without any creature comforts. The expressions on the men’s faces were a mixture of fear of what was to come, and determination to survive it for the sake of their loved ones. The women had expressions of sorrow the likes of which he had never seen, while the few children that he could see showed only hopelessness. Their lives, their world, their homes... they all appeared functional, but nothing more. Their existence had but one purpose... to serve the needs of the Jung, working the mines of Kalita.

What little guilt Nathan might have felt minutes earlier disappeared.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Naralena sat staring at the video display on the wall in Ellyus Barton's well-appointed guest suite. As of late, her days had been spent relaxing as she watched countless Cetian news and entertainment programs, both current and past. Although she had learned much about both the Jung, and the Cetian culture, she felt somewhat guilty. The last five days had felt more like a vacation than a dangerous, off-world assignment on an enemy-held world.

"Learning much?" Jessica asked as she entered the room.

"Actually, yes. Did you know that the Jung are telling the people of this system that the Earth is still infected with the bio-digital plague?"

"Seriously?"

"It appears to be a recent development, going back a few weeks at most. However, it appears to be gaining momentum lately."

"I know the Jung love to use propaganda—every government does—but it seems a bit far-fetched, doesn't it?"

"They're doing an awfully good job of it," Naralena insisted. "Pictures and everything."

"Where are they getting pictures?"

"I'm not sure about all of them, but I do recognize some of them. They're from just after the Jung first invaded your world. They were likely altered to remove any trace of the Jung from the images, of course, but the end result is quite effective. It paints a portrait of a world that is constantly

ravaged by the plague and is struggling to maintain a population large enough to support its own infrastructure.”

“I don’t get it,” Jessica admitted. “What’s the point?”

“The Jung are saying that they are trying to enforce a quarantine on the Earth to prevent them from spreading the plague, just like before.”

Jessica shook her head. “This is really suspicious. Why this effort? Why now?”

“To spread distrust?” Naralena suggested. “To build themselves up as protectors in the eyes of the local population?”

“Are they even bothering to tell the people of their attempt to conquer Earth?” Jessica wondered.

“Not a word. According to the Jung, they have ships parked outside the Sol system to prevent anyone from leaving it. If a ship doesn’t heed their warnings, they destroy it.”

“I suppose they have nice graphics for that one as well?”

“Of course.” Naralena looked at Jessica. “Do you think there is a correlation between our arrival and this new propaganda tactic?”

“It’s possible, I suppose,” Jessica admitted. “It’s also possible the Jung here at least know about the liberation of Earth. We were never quite sure of how many comm-drones were launched during that battle, or the direction they were launched. For all we know, the Jung have known about Earth’s liberation all along. Or this whole thing might have been planned from the start, as a ‘public opinion countermeasure’ of sorts. They probably thought of this long before our first jump, when they first learned about the jump-drive project. There’s no way to tell, really.”

“Then you’re not worried about it?”

“Worried? No, not really. No point,” Jessica insisted. “Nothing I can do about it. It *is* worthy of reporting to the Alliance, however, as it is bound to hamper development of relations *after* we clean the Jung out of this system.”

Naralena sighed. “I still can’t help but think that all of this could have been learned by monitoring emissions from the edge of the system, though.”

“Not really,” Jessica disagreed. “We tried that, and all we got was basic ship-to-ship stuff, and routine tests of their emergency broadcast network. The stuff you’ve been watching is streamed across their planetary network. They stopped using airborne broadcasts decades ago, just like we did. That’s one of the main reasons we came.”

“Yes, I remember. I guess I just feel a little guilty. I didn’t expect to be spending my days in enemy territory in a luxury apartment, watching entertainment broadcasts and snacking all day long. My God, I think I’ve gained at least three kilograms since we got here!”

Jessica smiled. “Yeah, we did kind of luck out on that one, didn’t we,” she agreed as she plopped down on the other end of the sofa.

“Not all of us,” Naralena commented solemnly, looking down at the floor. She noticed that Jessica had her shoes on. “Going downstairs again?”

“Yup.”

“You’ve gone down to speak to Ellyus every evening since we’ve been here.”

“Just keeping my eye on things.”

“Has he offered anything new since his intel was retrieved?” Naralena wondered.

“Not really,” Jessica admitted. “I guess I just like hearing his stories. I mean, for decades he has been doing what I wanted to do since the first day I started special operations

training. He's got so much experience to share, and no one to share it with... all this time. Can you imagine? Keeping a secret for that long? Even from your wife and children? That takes a serious amount of discipline. Now that we're here, he's like a burst water pipe. I feel bad for him. I practically have to gag him and kick him out the door, or he would never shut up and go home to his wife."

"Then, you're probably getting some good intelligence from these conversations."

"That's the weird thing," Jessica said. "I'm learning a lot about what *he* has gone through, and about the changes the Cetians have gone through, but nothing significant about the Jung forces."

"But he showed us tons of images, troop counts, defenses..."

"All of which we could have gotten from a few closer passes had we chosen to put the Scout ships at greater risk, and possibly even tip our hand to the Jung. Besides, all of the information he *has* provided is at *least* a decade old, at best."

"Well, he did say he pretty much gave up hope that anyone from Earth would ever contact him again," Naralena reminded her.

"Yes, he did," Jessica agreed, "and yes, that would explain his outdated intel."

"So, these talks you're having with him, you're pretty much like his therapist, then?" Naralena joked.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Have you figured out a way to get any of this information back to the Alliance?"

"I don't think we've found anything important enough to justify the risk," Jessica insisted.

"You don't think that the entire population of all three Cetian worlds being in *favor* of the Jung occupation is important?"

"I'm not sure that's entirely accurate," Jessica argued, "at least not according to Ellyus. He says it's mostly propaganda. He says that many of the private conversations he has had over the years—in a soundproof room, I might add—indicate otherwise. He believes that while there are quite a few Jung supporters, most people are just saying they are in favor of the Jung to avoid suspicion."

"I don't know," Naralena said, "I've seen a lot of propaganda back in the Pentaurus sector. The Ta'Akar Empire were masters at it. This is different."

"Perhaps, but it's not like the Cetians are going to pick up guns and fight alongside the Jung when the Ghatazhak show up."

"Probably not," Naralena agreed, "but don't expect them to be too thrilled about it either. These people have a thriving economy, good living conditions, and robust interplanetary trade... all the things they did *not* have until the Jung arrived."

"But they had to give up their freedom to get those things."

"Freedom is relative, Jess. One person's freedom is another person's anarchy."

"What?"

"I heard it on one of the Cetian programs," Naralena explained. "Quite true, when you think about it."

"Maybe, but it's also the kind of thing you'd expect to hear from pretty much any dictatorship," Jessica replied as she rose from her seat. "Anyway, I've got a patient downstairs waiting to see me," she added as she headed for the door. "Enjoy your research."

* * *

Doctor Galloway sat at the nursing station in the intensive care unit, studying patient reports on her data pad. She had been working at Geneva's central hospital for more than a month now, ever since they first started using nanites on Earth. At first, their use had been restricted to Alliance personnel, as well as a few of the more severe civilian cases. This was due largely to the fact that—for reasons they had been unable to determine—the Corinairan nanites seemed to cause considerable discomfort to anyone not from the Pentaurus cluster.

Although the medical facilities on Earth were inferior by Corinairan standards, it had been nice to again work in a more controlled and traditional environment, despite the fact that the hours were long and the patient load never ending. She felt as if she were gaining more experience per day here than she could in a year of residency back on Corinair.

"Doctor Galloway," the nurse said as she approached. "I have the latest statistical analysis you requested."

Doctor Galloway reached out and took the data chip from the young woman. "Thank you," she said as she inserted the chip into her data pad. The information contained on the chip began to scroll down her screen, causing a quizzical look to befall her.

"What is it?" the nurse wondered.

"Nothing. I just was expecting different numbers, I guess."

"How so?"

"As you know, the problem has always been that Terrans seem to experience discomfort during nanite therapy," Doctor Galloway explained. "However, a few isolated cases

have not experienced that discomfort. Now that we are administering the nanites to the general public, that percentage has risen... and drastically, I might add."

"How drastically?" the nurse wondered.

"It has practically reversed itself. Originally, ninety percent of the patients on nanite therapy experienced some level of discomfort. Now that we have begun administering to the general public, the percentage has dropped to twenty-three."

"That's good, though, right? Since there is such a shortage of analgesics?"

"Yes, it does make the patients easier to manage, since they do not need to take medications to manage the additional pain. However, it also means we are even further from discovering the reason behind the discomfort. Since our physiologies are the same, we had always assumed that the cause was environmental, but this bimodal distribution is puzzling."

"Maybe it's too soon to tell?" the nurse suggested. "After all, it has only been a few days since we began widespread usage of the nanites."

"I suppose you are right," Doctor Galloway agreed. "Odd that I find myself *hoping* for my patients to experience additional pain."

The nurse looked over Doctor Galloway's shoulder, noticing something on her data pad. "Did you notice the effectiveness percentage?"

Doctor Galloway looked at her data pad again. "No, I did not. I was so distracted by the drastic change in... That is odd."

"There have been other cases where the nanites did not work, haven't there?"

"Yes, but, according to this, the decrease in effectiveness correlates strongly with the decrease in discomfort." Doctor Galloway thought for a moment. "I am probably wrong about this, but let's begin screening the urine of all patients on nanite therapy for expelled nanites."

"I thought they stayed in the patient until you transmitted the evacuation command?"

"Usually, yes, but if the nanite fails, it is programmed to automatically disengage, allowing the body to flush it out of the system. We could be dealing with a bad batch of nanites, although this would be the first case I have seen in many years. The manufacturing process is quite precise."

"That would explain a lot," the nurse agreed.

"I will notify the other physicians monitoring nanite therapies," Doctor Galloway said. "Let's get the first round of urine testing going as soon as possible."

"Of course, Doctor."

* * *

Naralena looked down at the digital tablet that Ellyus had given her, as she took more notes about what she was seeing on the Cetian news programs. As she was writing, she could hear footsteps from the entryway. "That was quick," she called out. "I don't think it has even been an..." Her words fell short as she looked up and toward the doorway to her left. Standing there was a man, dressed in black from head to toe, his face covered by some sort of screen that diffused the features of his face. She did not react, trying to remain calm, just as she had been trained over the weeks preceding the mission. Without moving her head, she glanced to her right, looking for an escape route,

but another man in similar attire was blocking the other doorway.

“Where is the other one?” the first man asked. His voice had a metallic sound to it, as if it were being altered by some device. He was also speaking in English, but not perfect English.

“What?” Naralena responded, speaking in Jung using the same Cetian accent that she had observed over many hours of Cetian news broadcasts.

“There were two of you,” the man replied, again in English. “Where is the other?”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” Naralena said, again speaking in Jung.

“You are lying,” the man insisted, this time speaking in Jung. “She was here earlier.”

“She left,” Naralena replied, continuing in Jung. “She went shopping.”

“We do not have time for games,” the man told her. “You are both in danger.”

“Who are you?” Naralena asked, pretending not to understand them.

“The Jung have this place surrounded. They are preparing to storm the building as we speak. They will take you prisoner.”

“I don’t understand...”

“You are from the Aurora, right?” the man asked.

Naralena suddenly found it hard to hide her reaction, her eyes growing wide. They were nearly twelve light years from Earth, so even with the Jung’s fastest probes, it was unlikely that anyone on Kohara would know about the Aurora. “Who are you?” she asked, again in Jung.

“Who we are is unimportant. If you and your friend do not escape with us now, you will both die in Jung captivity.”

“Why should I believe you,” Naralena replied, still speaking Jung.

The man deactivated the visual distortion field, revealing his face to her. “You have no choice.”

Naralena stood. “She’s downstairs, with Ellyus, in his office,” she replied, this time in English.

The man tapped his comm-set, speaking in Cetian this time. “She is with the peeper, in his office.” A moment later he said, “Understood.” He looked at the other man, signaling him into action. “Go with this man,” he instructed as two more men came in from the outside landing and headed down the stairs behind the first man. “He will see to your safety.”

“What about my friend?” Naralena asked.

“I will see to hers,” the man answered as he turned to follow the others downstairs.

“Wait!” Naralena called out. “How did you know about the Aurora?”

The man turned back to look at her. “Jung comm-drones are much faster than you realize,” he told her just before he disappeared through the doorway.

* * *

“As expected, the people of Kalita did not offer any resistance,” Commander Telles told Nathan in his ready room.

“Any stragglers to deal with?” Nathan wondered.

“Not of a number that would cause concern,” Telles explained. “The conditions on Kalita are rather harsh. Without proper logistical support, the few Jung who escaped will be forced to either surrender, or die... either at the point of a Ghatazhak weapon, or by the atmosphere of Kalita,

once their particle filters have become saturated. In any case, they will cease to be a factor within a few days.”

“Have any of the Kalitans stepped up as leadership?” Nathan asked.

“No, and I do not expect any to do so. The people of Kalita wish only to leave Kalita, at the earliest opportunity.”

“Really. I did not expect that.”

“When the Jung took control of Kalita, the people fought back. In response to their efforts, the Jung decimated their world, killing more than ninety percent of their population in the process. The ones who survived were put to work in the mines. Kalita is rich in many ores, but was of little value to the Jung otherwise. Had the people not resisted, their civilization would probably be intact today.”

Nathan leaned back in his chair and sighed. “Still, you would think at least some of them would want to stay and rebuild.”

“There is nothing left to rebuild with,” the commander explained. “The Jung kept no industrial infrastructure here. Only the mining operations, the processing plants, and what little infrastructure that was required to keep the Kalitans alive to serve them. It is a meager existence by any measure. One totally devoid of hope. Kalita died long ago. What remains is nothing more than its bones, left to slowly decay over time.”

“How many of them are there?”

“Under a hundred thousand, I would guess.”

Nathan thought for a moment. “Tell them we will arrange to have them evacuated. It will take time, but it will happen. In the meantime, they must keep themselves alive with what they have, meager or not.”

“Understood,” Commander Telles replied. “To where shall they be evacuated?”

“Still to be determined,” Nathan answered. “We’ll arrange for medical teams and support personnel to help them keep it together until then.”

“I shall explain the situation to them.”

“I had hoped this would get easier,” Nathan admitted.

“In fact, I expect it to become harder,” Telles warned. “The longer a world has been under occupation, the more likely the population is to support the Jung. Worlds like Kalita, ones that were all but destroyed, are the exception.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Nathan agreed.

“I fear that the worlds of Tau Ceti will be even more challenging. The Jung will not want to give up three, fully industrialized, heavily populated worlds. Especially ones that have been reformed to be as hospitable as possible to humans. If the Cetian economy is as strong as it appears to be, their people may not want to be liberated.”

“That is why we sent Jessica and her team to Kohara.”

“Have they reported back yet?”

“No, they haven’t,” Nathan answered. “However, it has only been fifteen days. They won’t be considered overdue for another ten.”

“If they are unable to complete their mission, we may be forced to destroy the Jung ground forces from orbit. Due to the density of population surrounding those targets, the collateral damage will be quite significant.”

“I don’t suppose we could leave them intact?” Nathan wondered. “Maybe call up the Cetians and ask them if they’d like us to remove the Jung from their world before we attack?”

“Once the element of surprise is lost, the Jung will be better able to defend themselves. If necessary, they will disappear into the masses, creating a network of saboteurs that will be difficult to combat.”

“So, just taking out their ships and moving on is out of the question as well, I suppose?” Nathan inquired, already knowing the answer.

“You cannot win a war by leaving enemy forces alive and well near your borders,” Telles explained. “If a single Jung ship was able to retrieve those forces, and then somehow drop them on Earth...”

“Yeah, I know.” Nathan sighed again.

“Besides, it is not just about the existing Jung forces,” Telles added. “It is also about the industrial capacity of the Cetians. That is why the Jung have so many forces in that system, not because of its proximity to Earth.”

“The thought had crossed my mind,” Nathan replied. “Anyway, I expect Admiral Dumar will make that decision when the time comes.”

“I’m sure he will.”

“And if that decision is to attack the surface from orbit?”

“Then I will obey that order, and destroy the targets on the surface,” Nathan responded, looking the commander straight in the eyes.

“I am confident that you shall, indeed.”

“I won’t like it,” Nathan admitted, “but I will do it, nonetheless.”

* * *

Jessica looked at Ellyus Barton. “And you haven’t had any contact from any other operatives in going on twenty years?”

“Closer to twenty-five, I suspect,” Ellyus replied. “That’s the last time I remember having contact with any of the other operatives. That’s also when I decided to get married

and raise a family, so as to better blend in. On Kohara, *everyone* is married and has kids.”

“But you kept gathering intelligence. Why?”

“I guess part of me wanted to believe that eventually someone *would* come... that what I was doing mattered. I kept reminding myself that it took years to travel between Sol and Tau Ceti, and that the Earth only had so many ships. I kept telling myself that someday they would come. Unfortunately, they did not. It also became apparent to me that the Jung were so powerful, and had such an armada of ships, that there seemed to be little hope for Earth. I convinced myself that the same thing that happened here would happen on Earth—that the Jung would swoop in with dozens of ships and force the EDF to surrender. I convinced myself that it would be relatively bloodless, just as it was here, and that the people of Earth would be better off... again, just as it happened here.”

“Earth isn’t Kohara,” Jessica said.

“Yes, I know.”

Jessica leaned back in her chair and sighed. “For the life of me I can’t understand how anyone can accept subjugation in exchange for peace and prosperity.”

“I suspect it is simply a matter of priorities,” Ellyus said. “Some people are very headstrong and refuse to be told that there are things that they cannot do. Others are content to do what society asks of them and not make waves. My wife is that way. She does not want to be noticed, or stand out in any way. She is set in her routines, comfortable in familiar surroundings. Vacations tend to cause her considerable stress, as her routines are interrupted. To her, peace and security is far more valuable than freedom.”

"One person's freedom is another person's anarchy," Jessica mumbled, remembering the phrase that Naralena had quoted earlier.

"You've heard that one?"

"Nora has," Jessica said.

"It was very popular back in the months just after the Jung took over," Ellyus explained. "It was a mantra for the pro-Jung crowd in protest against an underground anti-Jung movement."

"So, there was some sort of resistance at one time?"

Ellyus raised his eyebrows. "I don't know that I would call it a 'resistance'. It was more of a movement... non-violent for the most part, as most Cetians abhor violence. The reactionary pro-Jung movement was triggered by a number of attacks allegedly carried out by the anti-Jung groups."

"Allegedly?"

"Many believed that the Jung staged attacks to discredit the anti-Jung groups, to make them appear as terrorists, and to rally support for the Jung occupation."

"What do you think happened?"

"I have no evidence either way," Ellyus admitted, "however, I find it hard to believe that the anti-Jung groups resorted to killing innocent people to make their point. Or should I say, I find it easier to believe that the Jung *would* resort to such measures... especially after what you said about Kent."

Jessica sat for a moment, thinking, looking at the pictures displayed on the view screen built into the conference table. She looked at Ellyus again. "So, have you ever considered returning to Earth?" she asked.

"I'd be lying if I said no," he admitted. "However, I came here never expecting to return home." He looked at her, a quizzical expression on his face. "Why do you ask?"

"We could get you off this world, if you'd like," she told him. "You and your family."

"I appreciate the offer, but Kohara is my home now."

"Are you ever going to tell your family?"

"About my real identity? What would be the point? After you have gone, I will destroy all the intelligence data I have collected over the years. Now that I have reported everything I know to you, my mission is finally complete. For that, I thank you."

"I'm not sure it's a good idea for you to hang around here," Jessica warned. "Things could get ugly really fast. It all depends on how things go. Either way, things in the Tau Ceti system are going to change, and soon."

"I don't suppose you can give me any more than that?" Ellyus wondered. "Like, when this is all going to happen, and how?"

"Sorry, you know the drill."

"Well, I have a tidy sum put away, much of it in precious metals and commodities. It should be enough to see us through whatever turmoil your Alliance is about to put us through."

"Well, if you change your..." Jessica stopped abruptly as a man dressed in what appeared to be black tactical gear came bursting through the door, his weapon held high against his shoulder, ready to fire. Ellyus immediately stood, raising his hands, surprise on his face.

"On the floor!" the first man barked in Jung.

Jessica also stood, but her hands did not go up. Instead, her left hand swept up and outward as she stepped forward, knocking the barrel of the intruder's energy rifle upward and away from her face. Her right fist jutted outward quickly, striking the man in his unprotected throat. At the same time, her free foot stepped behind the man's other leg, and

a slight push sent him tumbling backward, gasping for breath. Knowing that he would not have charged the room alone, Jessica grabbed her chair from behind her and brought it around in the air to strike the second man coming in behind the first, but he already had his rifle raised up in front of him, holding it vertically to one side with both hands in order to block the chair she was swinging toward him. Two more men came in behind the second, who was still dealing with the chair. Jessica managed to strike the first one in his face mask, but the other one caught her in the chest with the butt of his weapon, sending her tumbling backward over the table. By the time she got back to her feet, all three of the Jung soldiers had converged on her, managing to restrain her with considerable ease.

An officer entered the conference room next. By this time, Ellyus was also being restrained by two other soldiers, making a total of six of them in the room, including the one on his knees still gasping for air. The seventh man, the officer, came to stand just inside the doorway. She could see at least two more men in the corridor just outside the door. There was no escape.

The officer looked her over. "You will provide us with quite a lot of interesting intelligence about your Alliance."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jessica replied in Jung. "I'm here to negotiate a real estate purchase."

"You really should have practiced your Jung a bit more," the officer said, this time in heavily accented English.

Jessica cast him a puzzled expression. "What did you say?" she asked, again in Jung.

"I will give you points for trying, however," the officer replied. "Take them," he ordered his men.

Shots rang out in the corridor. Energy blasts struck the soldiers in the corridor, dropping them immediately. She felt

the guard on her right take one hand off of her arm to reach for his weapon on instinct. At the same time, the guard standing in front of her with his weapon to her face turned to look toward the door.

Jessica twisted her right arm to break the soldier's grip. She punched the soldier on the left in the stomach with her now-free right hand, then jammed her fist up into the underside of his chin. At the same time, she jammed her right foot up into the crotch of the Jung soldier in front of her as she snatched the weapon from his hand. The soldier in front of her doubled over in pain as she swung his stolen weapon around at shoulder height over his head, striking the soldier on her right in the side of his helmet, knocking him against the wall. Her left hand snatched the energy pistol from the holster of the soldier on her left. In one smooth motion, she put the barrel up into the front edge of his armpit where there was no body armor, and pressed the trigger. The energy bolt sliced through his left clavicle, coming out his shoulder and striking him in the left ear, just under the bottom edge of his helmet. The next shot was into the back of the now doubled-over guard who had stood in front of her. She came around to shoot the third guard, but he was ready. He swept her gun hand to the side and drove his fist into her face, causing her head to snap to the left.

More weapons fire rang in the corridor. As Jessica's head came around from the blow, she could feel the heat of energy weapons fire, followed by the sizzling sound of melting flesh. Her head came back around to her right and saw that all three of her guards were on the floor, dead or dying, as were the officer and the first guard who had entered the room. Ellyus was still standing there with his mouth open and his hands in the air.

Two more men entered the room, only they were not dressed in Jung tactical gear. They wore black, nondescript clothing. They did, however, carry Jung energy weapons, one of which was still smoking. Jessica realized that this man had been the one to kill the last guard, the one who had struck her in the face just before he died. Regardless, her weapon came up to fire.

"We are friendlies!" the man shouted in accented yet quite normal English. "We're spec-ops!"

"Whiskey seven one niner mike!" Jessica demanded, adrenalin surging through her veins.

"Tango, tango, one four seven, foxtrot!" the man answered without hesitation.

"Fuck!" Jessica exclaimed, lowering her weapon. "What the hell is going on here?"

"The place is surrounded by Jung, we gotta move, now!" the man instructed, as he turned back toward the door in case his men in the corridor needed his help to hold the Jung at bay.

Jessica could hear more weapons fire in the corridor, and see the red-orange flashes. The man was telling the truth. She looked at Ellyus. "Wait! What about him?" she asked.

"Leave him," the man told her. "He's a peeper."

"A what?"

"A peeper! A spy! Come on!"

Jessica looked at Ellyus, who looked more confused than ever, or at least he was putting on a good act of it. For the last six days, she had trusted this man, even though she knew that she shouldn't have. She had listened to his stories, reviewed his intel, had even felt sorry for all he had sacrificed over the years. She had come so close to telling him everything. "You son of a bitch," she muttered as she raised her weapon to take aim at Ellyus.

"No, wait!" Ellyus exclaimed, "I'm no spy!"

"Not any more, you're not," she continued as she pressed the trigger.

"WAIT!" the man warned.

It was too late. The energy bolt struck Ellyus square between the eyes, blowing the back of his head out and spraying blood and brains across the wall behind him.

"What are you doing?" the man asked.

"He was a fucking spy!" Jessica exclaimed.

"We've been trying to root him out for years! We could have used him to feed false information back to the Jung!"

"Fuck that," Jessica replied. One of the soldiers on the floor next to her moved, wounded, but still alive. Without looking, she pointed her weapon and shot him as well. "They wouldn't trust anything he said now anyway."

"Jesus!" the man exclaimed after seeing Jessica execute the guard so casually. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I don't like Jung," she said as she moved toward him. "I have a friend upstairs."

"We've already gotten her out," the man explained. "Follow me, and I'll take you to her."

"If you're lying to me too, you'll be the next one to die," Jessica warned as she walked passed him and entered the corridor.

The man watched her pass. "You're fucking welcome."

Jessica moved down the corridor to join the other two men at the corner who were firing across the lobby of the real estate office in a desperate attempt to keep the rest of the Jung outside from coming in. She peeked around the corner, spotting more men outside through the windows. The street outside was full of tactical vehicles. "They'll be bursting through every entrance in seconds," she commented.

“Cover fire!” the man ordered, “going up!” He ran across the open foyer, opening fire in the direction of the front entrance as he ran. Jessica followed, firing as well. She stopped at the other side to provide cover fire for the other two men still on the other side of the corridor, but before she could get a shot off, she felt herself being pulled back.

“Get your ass up those stairs!” he barked as he sent her tumbling toward the base of the stairs. He brought his weapon around and opened fire again as the first of the last two men darted across the foyer. “GO!” He pulled a small metallic ball from his side pocket and tossed it out into the lobby. “Flasher!” he shouted, covering up his ears and closing his eyes.

A bright, blinding light flashed over the room as a shrill, high-pitched noise filled the room. The last man came running across the foyer as his leader on the other side opened fire again. When he reached the other side, he immediately headed up the stairs behind Jessica and the man who had gone before him. The leader tossed out a second small metallic ball, followed by a pair of cubes. The room filled with light and noise again, just as the effects of the first flasher were fading. “Go, go, go!” he urged as he headed up the stairs behind them.

Explosions rocked the staircase, as the two cubes the leader had tossed out into the lobby detonated. Pieces of the ceiling began to fall on their heads, and the staircase felt as if it were going to drop out from under their feet. Flames backfilled the lobby, spreading instantly into the foyer and up the stairs behind them.

Jessica charged up the stairs. She paused at the top and turned around to see the others coming up after her. The first man passed her by and went straight to the outside entrance to the guest suite.

“They’re not here yet!” he called back after sticking his head outside to check. “Come on, lady!” he urged.

Jessica turned to join him. As she came through the door, the man handed her a device with two handles and a wheel in the middle.

“Do like me!” he ordered as he climbed over the railing of the exterior landing. He slung his own wheeled device over a cable that they had strung from the landing to the roof of the building across the alley, then pushed off, rolling down the wire to the far rooftop. As soon as he got to the other side, he dropped to the roof and rolled. He scrambled to his feet and ran back toward the near edge of the rooftop to watch for Jung troops in the alley.

Jessica did not hesitate, climbing over the rail and sliding down the wire using the wheeled device as well. As soon as she crossed the alley, she dropped to the roof below only a meter from the first man, who was now looking down over the side of the roof at the alley below.

Jessica rolled as she hit the roof, scrambling to her feet a moment later as she turned around to look back at the exterior landing. She could see the next man climbing over the railing and preparing to slide across to safety. Flashes of energy weapons fire filled the doorway behind the second man as he began his slide across.

“Jung!” the first man reported as he opened fire. “Coming into the alley!”

Bolts of red-orange energy shot upward between the buildings, barely missing the second man as he slid across on the cable and landed on the rooftop next to her. Jessica ran toward the edge of the building to help provide cover fire.

“No!” the second man warned as he got to his feet. “He’s got it!”

Jessica stopped and looked back at the second man. "There's still..."

"He's got it!" the second man repeated. "We have to get you out of here!"

Jessica wanted to stay and help make sure their leader got across safely, but she had already decided that these men knew what they were doing. She had not yet decided if they really were EDF spec-ops forces, but she was quite sure that they were just as skilled. She turned and followed the second man across the rooftop to the exit door. She turned and looked back as she was about to enter the doorway, just as the leader began his slide down the wire. Explosions went off in the guest suite behind him, as even more weapons fire shot skyward, up from between the buildings. The cable snapped, either from the explosions or from an incredibly lucky shot, she wasn't sure. Regardless, their leader began to fall. He struck the waist-high concrete wall along the edge of the roof, chest first, his feet dangling over the side. For a moment, he looked as if he were about to lose his grip and fall to the alley below, straight into the arms of the Jung who were firing up at him.

The other soldier firing downward from the roof's edge stood and began firing wildly, spraying back and forth with one hand as he sprinted the few meters to his struggling leader. While still firing, he grabbed the man's collar and yanked him up over the edge in unceremonious fashion, pulling him to safety. As his leader got to his feet and sprinted toward Jessica, the man who had pulled him to safety tossed several more objects into the alley below, before turning to follow his leader.

"GO!" the leader demanded.

Jessica turned and followed the first man down the stairwell. The building rocked slightly as muffled explosions

were heard outside, undoubtedly the result of the devices the last man had shared with their Jung pursuers. They continued down the stairs for several floors until they finally reached the bottom. "Where are we?" she wondered. "I thought there were only two floors to this building?"

"And two levels below ground for parking," the leader said as he caught up to her. He paused at the corner, peering around the wall to watch as one of his men sprinted across the relatively empty parking garage. Once at the other end of the garage, the man signaled back that all was clear, as he headed back toward them.

"What, is our ride parked down here?" Jessica wondered.

"Something like that," the leader replied.

Jessica felt a gun barrel against the back of her neck. She looked at the leader, anger washing over her face. She felt a pinprick in her left deltoid, instinctively turning her head to look. She wanted to pull away, but nothing seemed to be working.

"You can kill me later," the leader told her.

Then everything went dark.

* * *

Doctor Galloway studied the lab reports intently. "This doesn't make sense," she said.

"That's what I thought as well," Doctor Hammond agreed. "I've never seen urinary nanite counts this low. Not that I have that much experience in nanite therapy..."

"No, you are quite correct," Doctor Galloway insisted. "I too, have never seen such numbers. Even the basic failure rate of our nanites would produce a higher urinary count than this."

"How is it possible that the nanites are not doing their job, yet they are not evacuating? I thought they were programmed to exit if unable to follow their programming?"

"They are. I can only assume that they are still trying to carry out their programming."

"Perhaps something is causing them to perform their tasks more slowly than normal?" Doctor Hammond suggested.

"Our nanites only have a life-span of five days. This patient started therapy seven days ago, and had a booster given two days ago. There should be thousands, if not tens of thousands, of nanites per liter of urine at this point."

"What happens if they don't come out, and we keep giving the patient more nanites?"

"Theoretically, I suppose we could see congestion issues. Thickening of the blood, blockage of pathways, taxing of internal organs. Nanite therapy, depending on the aggressiveness of the protocols, can be quite hard on the internal systems. However, it would take a buildup of millions of nanites before we might see such side effects."

"Is there any other way we can get them out?" Doctor Hammond asked.

"We can issue a general evacuation order to the nanites. If they are still functioning, that should cause them to release and shut down, allowing the host to flush them out. However, most of these patients will not survive without nanite therapy."

"They're not surviving now," Doctor Hammond reminder her, "at least not for much longer."

"Of course." Doctor Galloway took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as she examined the list of patients. "We will start with Mister Abarta."

“Are you sure? Of all the patients, I think he is the least likely to survive without nanite therapy.”

“Which is all the more reason to resolve this issue as quickly as possible. If the nanites within him are defective, they could be doing more harm than good. Besides, it takes several days for all the nanites to be evacuated, sometimes even more. If we flush his nanites, we can reload him with new ones, perhaps from a different production batch.”

“Can’t we just give him a fresh dose of new nanites just after we issue the evacuation order, to save time?”

“That would not work,” Doctor Galloway explained. “The nanites communicate with one another. It is necessary if they are to accomplish their goals, as a single nanite can do little by itself.”

“Like a hive mentality.”

“In a manner of speaking, yes. Although it is actually many small hives, each one with a different goal. So you see, if the current load of nanites is defective, and the defect is in their programming, the defect could be transferred to the new nanites as well.”

“Like a computer virus,” Doctor Hammond said.

“Precisely.”

* * *

Jessica’s eyes popped open as if someone had just flipped a switch and woken her up. She was confused. She was lying on a bed. There was a wall to her right and a ceiling above, with natural sunlight coming into the room from overhead. She turned her head slightly to the right. A skylight... large enough that she could see blue skies and slow-moving clouds in the upper atmosphere.

She sat up, slowly at first, expecting to feel groggy and unsteady. She was not. She swung her legs around off the bed, putting her feet on the floor. She was still wearing the same clothing as she had been before... *Before that asshole injected me with something!*

She glanced around the room. A table and four chairs. A dresser. A view screen on the wall that was showing some Cetian program. Two doors, and two beds. The one she was sitting on, and another one along the opposite wall.

One of the doors opened. Jessica immediately tensed up in preparation to attack, relaxing a moment later.

"You're awake," Naralena said as she came back into the room.

"Yeah. Where are we?" Jessica asked, still looking around the room. "It looks like a cheap hotel."

"Not as cheap as the one we were staying in before," Naralena commented as she crossed the room and sat down on the edge of her bed.

"How long have you been awake?"

"Not long. I tried to wake you, but you were out."

"Have you checked the door?" Jessica wondered, standing up.

"Locked. No windows in the bathroom either."

"No one has tried to talk to you?"

"No. I'm pretty sure they know that we are awake, though," Naralena said, pointing to the camera over the exit door. "They also knew when we would wake up. The food on the table is fresh, and the water in the pitcher is still ice cold."

"Any idea how long we were out?" Jessica wondered.

"At least a day or two," Naralena replied.

Jessica looked at her. "Really?"

"I'm just guessing, based on what little I've seen on that monitor. Then again, they could be controlling all of that."

"Actually, it has been three days," a man's voice said.

Jessica and Naralena both looked at the view screen on the wall, where the voice had come from. The program that had been on was gone, replaced by the face of an older, distinguished-looking man.

"I apologize for the circumstances," the man continued. "It was necessary for security reasons."

"Where are we?" Jessica asked. "And who are you people?"

"All will be answered in good time," the man promised. "In the meanwhile, I ask you to be patient. Once we are certain that you are not Jung spies, you will be allowed to move more freely about the compound. Until then, I'm afraid you must be detained. We will try to make you as comfortable as possible. If you require anything, please feel free to ask. I cannot promise that we will be able to provide everything, but we shall do our best to accommodate."

"How much time?" Jessica asked.

"The screening process usually takes several days. However, it may take a bit longer for you, as we found nanites of unknown origin within your tissues."

"They're Corinairan," Jessica explained. "Left over from treatments for some rather serious injuries."

"Corinairan? I am not familiar with that term."

"A planet far, far away," Jessica replied with a touch of sarcasm, not wanting to go into any detail.

"That would explain a lot," the man agreed. "However, we must be certain of this before we can continue."

"And if we don't pass your little screening process?" Jessica wondered.

The man paused. "That would be... unfortunate."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Jessica mumbled. She turned back toward the view screen. "Any chance you can tell us where we are?"

"I'm sorry, no."

"Are we still on Kohara?"

"I'm sorry, but I can reveal nothing further. Please be patient. We hope to resolve this matter as soon as possible."

The man's face disappeared, and the original program continued on the view screen.

"What did he mean by unfortunate?" Naralena asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"I'm pretty sure he meant it would be 'unfortunate' for us," she explained, making a slashing motion across her throat.

"That's what I was afraid of."

Jessica pointed at the open door that Naralena had come out of minutes earlier. "That's a bathroom, right?"

"Yes."

"Great. I'll be right back," she said as she headed for the open door.

Naralena sat back down on the bed. "I'll be here."

* * *

"If the trial is allowed to drag out, the effect on the markets of Takara will be difficult to predict," Mister Rostaur warned.

"We are already seeing a significant decline in our economy," Mister Ullumbrach added.

"I am not concerned with the Takaran markets," Casimir said as he looked out his office window. He rotated in his chair slowly to face his advisors. "The markets will do what the markets will do. People will continue to offer products to

sell, and people will continue to buy them. The dust will settle from these events, and people will return to their lives, finding something else to be concerned about.”

“I’m sure you are correct,” Mister Rostaur agreed, “however, would it not be prudent to prevent any more loss of revenue than is necessary?”

“This is not a business,” Casimir replied, “it is a society.”

“Society is a business,” Mister Rostaur insisted. “You invest in it, you grow it, you make sure its customers—the citizens—are happy with the product. To ignore such matters and hope for the best invites economic catastrophe...”

“I cannot change the past,” Casimir interrupted, “would that I could. I also cannot control the future. The trial will go as the trial goes, according to Takaran law.”

“You have the power, my lord...” Mister Rostaur started.

Casimir cast a hard look in Mister Rostaur’s direction.

“...as unpleasant a thought as it may be, you alone can pardon them, thus sparing our economy of this uncertainty.”

“Out of respect for your long service to this house, I shall pretend that you never made that suggestion,” Casimir said. He looked at him with a stone cold expression. “However, I warn you... that respect has its limits.”

“My apologies,” Mister Rostaur replied, stepping back out of respect.

Mister Ullumbrach watched as Mister Rostaur left the room. He turned back to Casimir. “He would not be doing his job properly had he not made such a suggestion.”

“Then you agree with him?”

“I do not,” Mister Ullumbrach stated plainly. “In fact, there is nothing I would enjoy more than to see Dahra and his cronies convicted and executed for their crimes. If nothing more, being a nobleman requires you to adhere to the Charter of Torrence, a task at which all three failed

miserably. However, it is true that such a conviction, and the subsequent execution, will have significant repercussions, the likes of which we cannot accurately predict. Both economically, and politically. Furthermore, the appeals process will likely make things worse."

"Do not for a moment think that I have not considered all of this... day in and day out," Casimir told him.

"Of that I have no doubt, my lord. However, the people continue to be split on the matter."

"I cannot believe that anyone would side with Dahra..."

"It is not a matter of siding with Dahra," Mister Ullumbrach explained, "it is a matter of not being willing to suffer the consequences of his conviction and execution. No one wants to see Lord Dahra escape justice, but they also do not want their world torn apart by that justice."

Casimir sighed. "Thank you for your honesty, Mister Ullumbrach."

"You are most welcome." Mister Ullumbrach turned to depart.

"Please be sure to tell Mister Rostaur that my respect for him has not diminished in the slightest."

"I'm sure he will be happy to hear that, my lord."

Major Bellen watched as Mister Ullumbrach left the office, closing the door behind him. "They are correct, you know."

"I know."

"While I am aware that you have given the matter considerable thought, I too would be remiss in my responsibilities as your chief of security, were I not to point out the danger that Dahra's continued existence represents to this house."

"What would you have me do?" Casimir asked.

“No matter what you do, the result will be unfavorable at best.”

“And at worst?”

Major Bellen paused, not wanting to say the words. “Let’s just say that we will need considerably more troops at our disposal.”

Casimir sighed again. “You do realize my hands are tied in this situation. The law is the law, after all.”

“Laws are never black and white, my lord. Perhaps you should look to the gray areas for your answers.”

“You sound like my father, Major.”

“I shall take that as a compliment, as your father was a very wise man.”

* * *

“No change?” Doctor Galloway exclaimed. “I cannot believe it. It’s been five days. All of his nanites should be flushed from his system by now.”

“The level did increase slightly,” Doctor Hammond pointed out.

“Not enough to be statistically significant.” Doctor Galloway looked at the lab reports again, hoping that she had misread something. It would not be the first time, as she still was not completely accustomed to the backward manner in which the Terran hospitals conducted business. “If they are not responding to the most basic of orders, how do we know if we have any control over them at all?”

“I’m afraid if we don’t give the patient more nanites, he will die soon.”

“How can we give him more nanites if we have no control of the ones that are already in him?” Doctor Galloway insisted.

"If the ones that are in him are defective, maybe they are unable to pass the defective commands on to the new nanites? Maybe the current nanites are dead, or otherwise inactive?"

"If so, more of them would come out in his urine. For them to be incapacitated and not come out would mean that they would have to either be active and still clinging onto tissue, or that something else has somehow destroyed them."

"We are picking up trace minerals in the patient's urine," Doctor Hammond said, "ones that match those used in nanites."

"If they were being destroyed by something, we'd see greater levels of these materials."

"Is it possible that some nanites are devouring others?"

"That's impossible," she assured him. "The nanites do not possess the programming to destroy other nanites." She sighed. "I guess we have no choice. We have to give Mister Abarta a completely new dose of nanites, and hope for the best, I'm afraid."

* * *

"How much longer?" Sergeant Torwell asked from his seat in the combat jumper shuttle's topside weapons turret. He was sweaty and uncomfortable, with the afternoon sun of Porto Santo heating up the small bubble which surrounded his head.

"Minute twenty," Ensign Latfee replied from the flight deck. "What's your hurry?"

"It's damned hot back here."

"I've got the temp down as low as it can go back there."

"Yeah, well, I don't think they took this bubble into consideration when they designed this thing."

"That bubble was an add-on," Ensign Latfee reminded him.

"I know, I know," Sergeant Torwell replied. He sighed. "I miss our cargo shuttle. Why aren't we flying the cargo shuttle?"

"We have more combat hours than other crews," Lieutenant Kainan told him.

"No, you have more combat hours, sir," the sergeant corrected. "Latfee and I haven't fired a shot, other than in training, that is."

"Forty seconds," Ensign Latfee interjected.

"Where the pilot goes, the crew goes," the lieutenant added.

"I should've gone to flight school," Sergeant Torwell mumbled.

"Stop whining."

"*Porto Santo control to all jumpers,*" the controller called over the comms. "*Twenty seconds to go, on my mark.....*"

Ensign Latfee looked at the shuttle's mission clock to confirm that it matched.

"*Mark.*"

"Clock is good," the ensign announced from the copilot's seat. "All systems show ready for liftoff."

"Back is secure, gunner ready," Sergeant Torwell added.

"Ten seconds," Ensign Latfee announced as he looked back at the five Ghatazhak soldiers sitting in the back of the combat jump shuttle. He could barely make out the faces of the three sitting across the back of the compartment, just on the other side of the sergeant's gunner's seat suspended from the center of the shuttle's ceiling. He gave the

Ghatazhak the thumbs up signal. The Ghatazhak soldier in the center nodded slightly.

The ensign looked forward again, his eyes sweeping across the console in practiced fashion as he performed one last visual check before liftoff. "Five seconds," he announced. He pulled at his flight harness. "Three.....two.....one.....liftoff."

The shuttle's idling engines spun up almost instantly, causing the small spacecraft to rise easily off the tarmac. Sergeant Torwell looked to his left at the line of combat jump shuttles, of which they were the tenth and last in line. All of the ships lifted off the pavement in unison, climbing quickly into the sky.

"Ten meters," the copilot reported.

The ship began to pitch slightly upward as it began to accelerate.

"Jump to orbit in ten," Ensign Latfee continued. "Visors down, go to internals." The young copilot reached up and pulled his visor down, sealing his helmet closed. The action automatically triggered his pressure suit's ventilation system to increase its efforts now that he was no longer breathing the air in the cabin. "Five seconds. Speed good at two zero zero. Course and pitch on target. Three.....two.....one.....jumping."

The shuttle's windows instantly became opaque a second before the jump flash washed over the jump shuttle, preventing the brilliant blue-white light from spilling into the cockpit.

"Jump complete," the ensign reported as the shuttle's windows became clear again. Outside their forward windshields, the blue skies over Porto Santo had been replaced by the blackness of space. To his left he could see the Earth's moon, glowing brightly.

"Ah," the sergeant sighed. "That's better."

"New course. One five seven, up eight relative," Ensign Latfee said, passing the information to his pilot to prepare for the series of jumps that would take them to their destination.

"One five seven, up eight," the pilot confirmed.

"Decreasing power," the copilot added as he pulled the main thrust levers back to minimum. "Depressurizing for combat mode."

"At least it will be nighttime on Weldon," the sergeant added, as the low rumble of the shuttle's engines faded.

"Be sharp, Torwell," the pilot warned. "This one is supposed to be a bit hotter."

"You meant that in terms of combat, not temperature, didn't you," the sergeant commented.

"Correct."

"I think I'd rather you were talking about the temperature." Sergeant Torwell rotated his weapons turret aft to watch the Earth, and the Karuzara asteroid above it, shrink as they left orbit and accelerated away from them. As he rotated back around, he saw a flight of Falcons that had left Porto Santo at the same time, pass them by and disappear in flashes of light as they jumped into the combat zone ahead of them. "Falcons are away," he reported.

"Right on time," the copilot commented. "One minute to jump point. On the numbers. Jump series plotted and locked."

"How many jumps this time?" the sergeant asked.

"Were you asleep at the briefing?" the pilot wondered.

"I must have missed it," the sergeant admitted. "Dunny kept talking to me the whole briefing."

"You couldn't tell him to shut up?" the lieutenant asked.

"Have you ever tried to shut Dunny up?"

"At such a low speed, it's going to take us twenty-two jumps to get there," Ensign Latfee explained. "So just under two minutes."

"Got it," the sergeant replied. "So, in just *over* two minutes, we become targets. Fun."

"Hey, you volunteered, just like the rest of us."

"It was Dunny's idea," the sergeant insisted. "'We'll get to travel all over the galaxy.' He didn't mention the getting shot at part."

"Thirty seconds," Ensign Latfee said.

"The Alliance is a military organization, Torwell. What did you expect?" the lieutenant wondered.

"I expected to be sitting in the back of a cargo shuttle," the sergeant grumbled.

"You people talk too much," the Ghatazhak squad leader complained.

"Ten seconds to jump point," Ensign Latfee reported.

"Maybe if you complain to Commander Telles, he'll send us back to our cargo shuttle?" the sergeant suggested to the Ghatazhak sergeant.

"Or maybe a Jung will take your head off today," the Ghatazhak sergeant sneered, an evil grin on his face as he tilted his head back and looked up at Sergeant Torwell.

"Three..." the copilot began to count.

Sergeant Torwell looked down between his legs, rotating his turret slightly left so he could see the face of the grinning Ghatazhak sergeant. "That was not nice, Lazo."

"...Two..."

The Ghatazhak corporal's grin became more broad.

"...One..."

The turret bubble surrounding Sergeant Torwell's head became opaque.

"...Jumping..."

The shuttle began a series of jumps that occurred once every five seconds. With the windows opaque, the only indication the flight crew had of the jumps were their instruments.

"Oh, this is so much better than having your visor fade back and forth," the lieutenant commented.

"Great," Sergeant Torwell complained, "now the lieutenant is in love with *this* ship."

"Sorry, Sergeant, but there's no way I'm going back to that cargo shuttle," the lieutenant replied, "not after flying this thing for the last week."

"We'll see if you still feel that way after getting shot at," the sergeant replied.

"Twenty jumps to go," the copilot announced.

"I've been shot at before," the lieutenant reminded the sergeant.

"Yeah, by these guys," the sergeant replied. He looked down at the Ghatazhak sergeant. "Not *you* guys, of course. You guys are *great*!"

Sergeant Lazo just shook his head in dismay at Sergeant Torwell's need to continually talk. "I wonder if your friend Dunny says the same thing about you?"

"Fifteen to go."

"You see?" Torwell exclaimed. "I told you the Ghatazhak have a sense of humor. Sarcastic as all hell, but a sense of humor nonetheless."

"Didn't anyone ever teach you not to provoke a Ghatazhak?" the lieutenant wondered.

"Ten to go."

"Ghatazhak," Sergeant Lazo called out, "make ready."

The other four Ghatazhak soldiers checked their safeties and powered up their energy rifles. Sergeant Torwell powered up his energy weapons turret as well.

On the flight deck, the copilot continued to watch the jump status displays. "Five to go, twenty-five seconds."

The lieutenant shifted in the pilot's seat, preparing himself for whatever they would face when they came out of the jump series.

"Three to go; fifteen." Ensign Latfee continued to watch the jump status displays, checking that each position check between jumps showed green, indicating that they were on course as planned. "Ten seconds."

Sergeant Torwell put his hands on the turret controls, readying himself for action.

"Last jump in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

A second later, the shuttle's windows became clear again. Before them was Weldon, the same planet near which they had released Lieutenant Dorn and his squad of Ghatazhak for a five-day cold-coast and space jump insertion to the surface. Above the planet was a massive debris field, with another even larger one just beyond the first and at a slightly higher orbit. Flashes of blue-white light appeared intermittently in the distance as Falcons and other jump shuttles jumped in and out of the immediate area. A large explosion was seen to their port side, followed by an even bigger flash of jump light.

"Jump series complete," the copilot reported.

"Damn!" the sergeant exclaimed as he witnessed the battle taking place over Weldon, not more than a hundred kilometers away.

"Position verified," the copilot added, "We're right on target."

"Pitching down," the lieutenant announced.

"Come to course, two five five, twelve down relative."

"Jung fighters! Port side!" the sergeant reported as he swung his turret to port and opened fire.

"Two five five, twelve down," the pilot confirmed.

"Where the hell did they come from?" the copilot wondered as he glanced at his threat display.

"Hold your fire!" the pilot ordered as he brought the shuttle onto a new heading in preparation for their next jump.

"Jumper One Zero, Falcon One Four!" a voice called urgently over the comms. "Hold your fire! We're on the tail of the inbounds! Break right and down relative!"

"Jumper One Zero, breaking right and down," the copilot replied as the pilot rolled the shuttle to starboard and pushed the nose down as they turned away.

"Goddamn it, Torwell!" the pilot exclaimed as he maneuvered the shuttle out of the line of fire of the incoming Falcons.

"Fuck, L-T! They were coming right at us!"

"You knew there would be friendlies out there! Check your threat board before you fire!"

Three explosions just aft and to port of the shuttle lit up the inside of the sergeant's bubble as the Falcons destroyed the Jung fighters threatening the combat jump shuttle.

"Three down!" the pilot of the Falcon reported. *"Jumper One Zero, you're clear for insertion, but make it quick. There are more bandits in the area."*

"Jumper One Zero copies," the copilot replied. "Thanks."

"Give me a new heading," the lieutenant urged.

"We're not that far off," Ensign Latfee replied. "Pitch back up four, and come left to two two zero. We'll be a little shallow but still good for insertion at alpha four."

"Up four and come to two two zero," the pilot replied as he brought the shuttle back on course. "How late are we going to be?"

"Twenty seconds at the most," Ensign Latfee replied.
"We can increase speed to make up for it if you want."

"We're already going to be coming in fast as it is."

"Adjusted jump course plotted and ready," the copilot reported.

"Very well."

"Five seconds to jump," Ensign Latfee added.

"Ghatazhak, be ready," Sergeant Lazo prompted.

"Three.....two.....one.....jumping."

The jump shuttle's windows again cycled from clear to opaque, and then back again. The shuttle lurched violently as it suddenly found itself plowing through Weldon's atmosphere. Lying before them was one of Weldon's capital cities, Parando, its lights twinkling below them as they fell from the sky. The pilot immediately pitched their nose up, and the copilot swung their engine pods downward and brought all four thrust levers to full power in order to slow their descent.

"I've got more inbound, four o'clock high!" Sergeant Torwell announced as he glanced down at his threat display. He looked to his left as more flashes of blue-white light reported the arrival of the other combat jump shuttles. "I'm not picking up any Falcons on them!" he added as he swung his guns to starboard.

"I'm not seeing any either!" the lieutenant confirmed.

"Jumper One Zero, enemy fast movers at our four high!" the pilot broadcast over the combat channel. "Engaging!"

"Open up, Torwell!" the lieutenant ordered.

Red energy bolts passed just over the top of the sergeant's head as he brought his guns to bear and opened fire. An explosion rocked the shuttle from behind as he continued to fire. Four distant lights in the sky grew larger

as the Jung fighters dove in on them, their energy cannons blazing away.

"Where the hell did they come from?" the lieutenant wondered as he started an evasive maneuver. "The attack only started two minutes ago!"

"They must have already been in the air!" the copilot surmised. "A patrol or something!"

One of the growing dots of light became enveloped in a ball of orange-yellow fire as the sergeant's energy weapon found its first victim.

"Fuck yeah!"

"Fifty meters!" the copilot called out as the pilot swung the ship back around to the left and continued his descent toward their assigned insertion point. "Twenty seconds!" he called out, turning to face aft toward the Ghatazhak troops about to deploy. "Pop the doors!"

Another explosion rocked the shuttle. Sergeant Torwell glanced down at his threat display as he continued to fire. "Shit! Two of our shuttles are gone!" he exclaimed. "Where the hell are the Falcons?"

"Just keep firing!" the lieutenant ordered.

"Twenty meters! Ten seconds!" the copilot reported.

Sergeant Lazo reached over and unlocked the starboard door next to him, allowing it to slide aft into the side of the ship. At the same time, the Ghatazhak soldier in the aft-facing seat on the port side did the same. A rush of air filled the interior of the shuttle, swirling forward into the cockpit as well as up into the sergeant's gun turret bubble. The squad leader looked out at the streets below. They were the first wave of troops to hit the ground, and although there would not yet be significant resistance, they would be on their own until the next wave of troops arrived a few minutes later.

Bolts of energy from the diving fighters streaked past them on all sides, slamming into the street and buildings below. The fact that the Jung fighter pilots seemed to be unconcerned with collateral damage to the civilian population told the Ghatazhak much about the forces they were about to face.

“Stand ready!” Sergeant Lazo ordered. The remaining members of his team stood, hanging onto the overhead rail to maintain their balance as their shuttle swerved to miss a building on its way down.

“Three.....two.....one..... Go! Go! Go!” the copilot ordered.

The Ghatazhak soldiers jumped from the open doorways, one after the other, falling the last ten meters to the surface. They hit the ground running, the legs of their suits tensing to absorb the force of landing. The Ghatazhak immediately headed for the cover of nearby buildings, as the Jung fighters were still diving on the eight remaining combat jumper shuttles directly overhead.

The copilot looked out his window at the Ghatazhak soldiers running for cover, counting them and confirming that all five had left the shuttle. “All five on the ground!”

“Full power!” the lieutenant ordered.

Ensign Latfee pushed all four thrust levers forward, and the shuttle began to accelerate forward and upward. The lieutenant rolled slightly to the right and pulled their nose around, steering the shuttle around and as close to the buildings on their right as possible to shield them from incoming fire.

Sergeant Torwell’s line of fire was temporarily interrupted by the maneuver, the bolts of energy from his twin barrels slamming into the upper edge of the building to starboard.

“Pitching up!” the lieutenant announced as he pulled their nose up slightly. “Micro-jump us out of the line of fire! Quick, before we come out from behind the building!”

The copilot checked their trajectory and angle of climb, ensuring that there was nothing in their current flight path to block their safe jump line. “Jumping!” he announced as he pressed the pre-programmed escape jump button.

The windows of the shuttle turned opaque again, clearing up a second later. The shuttle crew found themselves now ten kilometers to the east of their original position, and at an altitude of several thousand meters instead of twenty meters.

“Goddamn!” Sergeant Torwell exclaimed, now that he had stopped firing.

“Coming about,” the pilot announced as he started his turn.

“What?” the sergeant asked, surprised.

“We have to provide cover for the first wave of troop shuttles,” the copilot explained. “I guess you missed that part of the briefing as well.”

“Fuck.”

“Just keep our six clear, Torwell,” the lieutenant instructed. “We’ll handle anything in front with our forward guns.”

“Where the hell are the Falcons?” the sergeant wondered.

“I’ve got them on long range,” Ensign Latfee reported. “They’re on their way to intercept more fast movers inbound from the south.”

“Jump flashes!” the lieutenant announced, pointing slightly right of their course and below them.

Ten more jump flashes appeared spread out below and ahead of them, as the larger cargo shuttles that carried

twenty Ghatazhak soldiers each prepared to deliver their forces to the city streets below.

"I've got four more Jung fighters inbound, headed for the troop shuttles," Ensign Latfee warned.

"Plot me an intercept," Lieutenant Kainan ordered.

"Are you crazy?" the ensign asked. "We can't keep up with those fighters."

"We don't have to!" the lieutenant explained. "We just have to shake them up a bit, keep them more concerned with us than those troop shuttles!"

"But..."

"Just be ready on that escape jump button!" the lieutenant added.

"I've got two more coming in from the west," Sergeant Torwell announced as he rotated his guns aft. "They'll be on us in one minute."

"Just keep them off our tail," the lieutenant urged as he brought the ship around and dove toward the troop shuttles landing on the city streets below and a few kilometers ahead of them.

"I'll try," the sergeant replied as he opened fire.

"What are you doing?" Ensign Latfee exclaimed. "They're not even in range yet!"

"I'm just trying to scare them!" the sergeant replied as he continued firing.

Ensign Latfee looked forward again. "There!" he said, pointing to their right. "Four engines! Diving toward the troop shuttles!"

"Are we at full power?" the pilot demanded.

"Yes, sir. Forward guns are online and ready to fire. Range in twenty seconds."

"Those fighters will be on them in fifteen."

“Troop shuttles, Combat Jumper One Zero. Fast movers at your five high. Ten seconds out. Get your troops on the ground and jump out!” Ensign Latfee looked at his threat board again. “Ten seconds to range.”

The lieutenant pressed the trigger, opening up with their side-mounted forward guns.

“What are you doing?” the copilot wondered.

“Trying to scare them,” the lieutenant replied. He glanced at his copilot. “Hey, maybe they’re wrong about the effective range of our guns,” he added with a shrug.

Flashes of red light could be seen several kilometers ahead of them as the Jung fighters began firing on the troop jump shuttles depositing their forces on the ground below. One of the shuttles took a direct hit, causing their aft starboard engine pod to come apart. The sudden loss of lift caused that corner to drop sharply, and the troop shuttle rotated to the left, its aft end swinging around to the right and striking a building as it fell to the ground. The impact broke it apart and its fuel tanks ruptured, spilling propellant that immediately caught fire and exploded, killing all twenty Ghatazhak aboard as well as the shuttle’s flight crew.

“Range!” Ensign Latfee announced. Their weapons fire found a target, ripping a Jung fighter into pieces. The remaining Jung fighters broke off their attack, peeling off to either side as they pitched up and went to full power to climb. One by one, the troop shuttles finished depositing their troops onto the surface, and quickly disappeared in flashes of blue-white light.

“Pitching up,” the lieutenant reported as he pulled the shuttle’s nose up toward the night sky.

“We’ve still got two on our ass!” Sergeant Torwell, reminded him.

“Micro-jump us out of range,” the lieutenant ordered.

“Jumping!” Ensign Latfee replied. The windows went opaque for a moment.

“Plot us a jump back to Porto Santo,” the lieutenant ordered. “We have to pick up another load and return.”

“We have to do that again?” the sergeant asked, genuinely shocked by the news.

“Yup.”

“How many times?”

“Until they tell us to stop,” the lieutenant replied.

Commander Telles studied the first reports from the ground attack on Weldon being transmitted from the jump shuttles as they arrived at Porto Santo. “We lost thirty Ghatazhak and three ships and crews in the first wave?”

“I’m afraid so,” Master Sergeant Jahal answered. “It appears that the Jung forces on Weldon live among the locals, rather than being clustered in centralized locations. While the Aurora was successful in destroying their bases from orbit, troops are appearing in small squads all over the capital city. As more of these squads report in, the squads will become platoons, and so on.”

“What about their air cover?”

“They had three squadrons in the air at the time of the attack. One was in orbit doing training, the other two were doing exercises in the lower atmosphere. Just bad timing, I suppose. Had they not been in the air, our losses at this point would have been minimal.”

“Their air bases have been destroyed, yes?” Commander Telles inquired.

“Yes, the latest field reports via comm-drone have confirmed that. The Falcons are now engaging the last of

their fighters. The skies should be ours within the hour," Master Sergeant Jahal assured his commander.

"The tactical environment will be fluid, and difficult to manage," Commander Telles said. "We will go now, rather than waiting for the fourth wave."

"Without the armored command bunkers?" the master sergeant wondered, appearing concerned.

"Our forces on the ground need centralized coordination now, not later. Without it, they could be overrun by these Jung *bezattes*. Bump the team from Combat Jumper One," Commander Telles ordered. "Our team will take their place."

"Jumper One did not return," Master Sergeant Jahal replied. "They were destroyed in orbit before they reached the surface."

"Whichever shuttle is closest, then," Commander Telles said as he grabbed his energy rifle and helmet and headed for the door. "We leave now."

"Yes, sir," Master Sergeant Jahal acknowledged.

"Lieutenant Morley, take command here. We will rendezvous with the command bunker once it is in place."

"Yes, Commander," the lieutenant answered.

Master Sergeant Jahal followed his commander out of the command center and down the corridor toward the exit, picking up his own rifle and helmet along the way. "Forgive me, Commander, but is it wise for the commander of all Ghatazhak forces in the Sol sector to enter into a combat zone that has not yet been secured? Were you to fall..."

"Then another would take my place," Commander Telles replied as he opened the door and stepped out into the light of day. He paused, turning back toward his friend and master sergeant. "I cannot lead these forces from a secure bunker in a safe zone, Jahal. You and I both know this. I must taste the battle, witness the skills of the enemy first hand.

Only then can I develop an accurate understanding of the enemy's strengths and weaknesses."

"Or, you could listen to the reports of your platoon commanders," Master Sergeant Jahal said.

"That is the way of fat, old generals," Commander Telles retorted as he turned to continue toward the nearest landing spot as a newly returning combat jump shuttle came in for a landing in front of him. "I am not yet that man," he insisted, "and I don't plan on becoming him any time soon."

Sergeant Torwell slid the starboard door open to allow the next group of five Ghatazhak soldiers to board. "Let's go!" he yelled out at the soldiers standing just off the landing pad.

"Wait!" an officer yelled from behind the men.

Sergeant Torwell looked toward the officer, his eyes turning wide. "Oh, shit," he said over his helmet comms.

"What?" Ensign Latfee wondered.

"Is that Telles?" the sergeant wondered.

Ensign Latfee turned and looked out the window to his right. "Uh, yeah, it is."

"Why is he coming here?" the sergeant wondered. The men standing along the pad expecting to board stepped aside, making room for Commander Telles and Master Sergeant Jahal.

"Team Eight, stand down, join the third wave instead," Commander Telles ordered. "I need this shuttle." The commander jumped up into the open doorway, moving past Sergeant Torwell and leaning forward between the port and starboard forward engine bulkheads. "Lieutenant! Can you put me in the middle of the action?"

“Yes, sir!” lieutenant Kainan replied. “We’ll put you anywhere you like, Commander.”

“That’s what I want to hear,” Telles replied as he took his seat on the port, aft-facing seat. He waived at his master sergeant.

“Willem, Todd, Anwar!” the master sergeant bellowed. “Mount up!”

The three Ghatazhak soldiers climbed aboard the shuttle, taking their places along the aft bench seat, followed by the master sergeant.

Sergeant Torwell looked through the starboard window at Ensign Latfee sitting in the shuttle’s copilot seat, casting a wide-eyed look as if to ask, *What the hell is going on?* Ensign Latfee only shrugged.

Sergeant Torwell climbed aboard, sliding the door closed behind him before he climbed into the gunner’s chair suspended from the center of the compartment’s ceiling. Once in his seat, a tap of a button raised him up so that his head was again in the turret bubble. “Closed up, gunner ready,” he reported.

“Lifting off,” the pilot announced as the shuttle’s engines spun back up and pushed the ship back into the air. He pitched their nose upward and began to accelerate. “Get us into space,” he instructed his copilot.

“Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping.”

Energy weapons fire streaked in all directions in the streets of Parando. Ghatazhak moved quickly about, ducking in and out of doorways, from behind parked vehicles, stone planters, and anything else they could find that would provide cover from whatever direction the enemy fire happened to be coming from at the moment.

“Fuck!” Corporal Ward exclaimed as he finished his sprint across the open street and slammed back-first against the building. The last two Ghatazhak in his squad were hot on his heels, arriving in similar fashion to join the previous three.

Sergeant Lazo continued providing cover fire until all four members of his team had made it safely across the street. Weapons fire was coming from all directions. Energy bolts of varying intensities and colors were raining down from the rooftops, as well as from either end of the street.

“What the hell is going on here?” one of the Ghatazhak soldiers asked as he fired at a combatant on the roof across and down the street. The combatant had made the fatal mistake of leaning out to find targets, and the soldier had made sure that it was the combatant’s last mistake. “These can’t all be Jung!”

“Red shit is Jung!” Corporal Ward explained. “Blue and green shit has got to be civilians, since they can’t seem to shoot worth fuck!”

A Jung soldier attempting to move down the street to get a better firing angle on the team of Ghatazhak was struck in the head and shoulders by blue energy weapons fire coming from the roof directly over them.

Corporal Ward saw the Jung soldier take the hit and fall to the ground. He immediately fired a shot into the fallen soldier’s body to ensure that he would not get back up. “What the fuck? Did you see that?”

“Yeah!” another Ghatazhak soldier replied. “I guess not everyone on this rock is a Jung-lover.”

“How the hell are we supposed to tell the difference?” another Ghatazhak wondered as several bolts of green energy struck another Jung soldier down the street.

“You know the drill,” Sergeant Lazo replied as he moved his weapon to his right and took out another armed civilian on the rooftops with a single shot. “If they have a gun and they’re not dressed like us, kill them.” Several more bolts of green and blue energy weapons fire slammed into the pavement and the walls around them. The sergeant fired several more times, dropping two more of the would-be snipers. “If they are on our side, they’ll wise up pretty quick.”

Jump flashes began appearing overhead, washing the streets with thunderous claps as the air was displaced by the arriving jump shuttles. Combat jumpers appearing overhead immediately began spraying the rooftops with their side-mounted energy weapons. Large troop shuttles slid in over the rooftops, their armored bellies taking hits from Jung energy weapons fired from the ground as the shuttles moved into position to drop their troops. Gunners in the open side doors of the troop shuttles returned fire, spraying the streets below with needle-like bolts of highly charged plasma.

One of the troop shuttles came to a hovering position directly in front of Sergeant Lazo and his men. Twenty Ghatazhak troops jumped from the open rear cargo ramp as two of the shuttle’s crew stood in the doorway and picked off the armed combatants on the rooftops. The soldiers dropped to the ground and immediately began firing toward either ends of the street.

A steady barrage of red energy weapons fire slammed into the nose of the shuttle, walking its way up and across the forward windshield. The flight deck of the shuttle came apart as the crew tried to initiate a climb. The shuttle pitched up sharply, but in so doing its left forward engine pod swung into the line of fire, exploding as its propellant

was ignited by the red bolts of energy. The shuttle rolled to its right, struck the building, and fell to the ground, crushing at least half of the Ghatazhak that had jumped to the ground seconds earlier.

“Jump complete,” Ensign Latfee reported as the shuttle rocked violently from the sudden resistance of Weldon’s atmosphere.

“Holy shit!” Sergeant Torwell exclaimed from his weapons turret. Before them, on the street below and only a hundred meters ahead of them, a troop shuttle was breaking apart and exploding as it careened off the side of a building and hit the ground on its starboard side. The fireball flashed outward in all directions, hitting the sides of the buildings and washing up the walls.

Commander Telles turned to look forward down the narrow, meter and a half long passageway that connected the combat jump shuttle’s passenger compartment to its flight deck. He stood, slightly hunched over as he moved forward to get a better view out the front windshields. He was just in time to see the destruction, as well as the civilians firing from the rooftops and the heavier weapons being fired by the Jung from the far end of the street. He tapped the comm-set control button on the side of his helmet. “Telles to all forces. Everyone on the rooftops dies. All combat jumpers, put your troops on the rooftops. Troop jumpers, keep putting them in the streets. I want control of this area... now!” He switched back to the intercom channel. “Lieutenant,” he said, pointing at the next intersection where the greatest amount of energy weapons fire was coming from. “Get guns on that intersection! That’s where I want you to drop us!”

“On top of a strongpoint?” the lieutenant asked, not believing what he was hearing.

“They’ll never expect it,” the commander said. “Besides, they’ll be firing at you, not us. As low and slow as you can, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir,” the lieutenant replied as he exchanged glances with his copilot. “You heard him,” he said to Ensign Latfee. “Light ‘em up.”

The commander returned to his seat, reaching to open the port-side door.

“Sometimes I think you have a death wish, Commander,” Master Sergeant Jahal said as he opened the door on his side of the shuttle.

The twin barrels on either side of the shuttle angled slightly downward and began firing, sending bolts of red-orange plasma energy streaking past the opened side doors of the shuttle.

“We all die, Master Sergeant,” Commander Telles replied, a slight smile showing. “We Ghatazhak just choose to do so in grander fashion.”

The interior of the shuttle flashed repeatedly with red-orange light from the plasma bolts streaking past their side doors. Smaller bolts of blue or green energy flashed past as well, headed skyward, some of them slamming into the shielded underside of the shuttle as they dropped down low between the buildings.

Commander Telles stood again. “Ghatazhak! Stand ready!” He leaned out the open doorway and looked forward. “Lieutenant!” he called over the shuttle’s intercoms, “be ready to kick your tail to port on my command.”

“Aye, sir!” the pilot responded.

Telles turned to look back at his men. "Willem, Todd, starboard side with Jahal! Anwar, port side with me!"

The shuttle's guns fell silent, no longer able to angle down sufficiently as they closed on the Jung strongpoint. Sergeant Torwell continued firing at the nearby rooftops, many of which the shuttle was now only slight below.

"Ten seconds," Ensign Latfee reported from the copilot's seat.

Commander Telles flipped the safety on his energy rifle off. Several bolts of energy slammed into the underside of the shuttle, causing it to shake violently.

"Kicking to port," Lieutenant Kainan announced.

The combat jump shuttle rotated to starboard, causing them to approach the Jung strongpoint sideways. Commander Telles and Private Anwar began to open fire on the Jung below as they prepared to jump.

"We're taking a lot of fire on our ventral armor plating," Ensign Latfee warned. "It's heating up awfully fast. I don't know how much longer it will hold."

"Be ready on that escape jump," Lieutenant Kainan said.

"Ghatazhak," the ensign began, "deploy in three.....two.....one.....Go! Go! Go!"

As Ensign Latfee turned to look aft, the five Ghatazhak jumped from the open doors of the combat shuttle toward the Jung strongpoint passing ten meters below them... Commander Telles and Private Anwar from the left, and Master Sergeant Jahal and Privates Willem and Todd from the right.

"Troops are away!" Ensign Latfee reported as he turned to face forward again.

"Jump!" the lieutenant ordered as he increased power and pitched their nose slightly upward.

Ensign Latfee pressed the escape jump button without delay, causing a pre-programmed escape jump that would instantly transition the shuttle five kilometers ahead along their current trajectory. Their windows instantly became opaque, blocking out the outside view, but the blue-white flash of the jump was translated into the interior of the jump shuttle through its open side doors.

“Jesus, that’s bright!” Sergeant Torwell exclaimed.

Commander Telles felt the screech of the shuttle’s jump, and felt the air pulling at him like a vacuum as it rushed to fill in the void left by the disappearing shuttle. Although the flash of blue-white light was enough to turn the immediate area from night to day for a second, the Commander was not looking directly at the flash when it occurred, and thus was spared the momentary blindness.

The commander landed directly behind a Jung soldier holding an oversized energy rifle, facing away from him. The commander allowed himself to fall forward with the momentum imparted to him by the shuttle, tucking into a roll and coming back up to his feet two meters further down the street. He fired three shots directly ahead, taking out three Jung soldiers charging toward them from further down the street. He spun around to his left just in time to raise his rifle with both hands and block the first Jung soldier’s weapon from coming down onto the side of his head. Telles pushed the attacker’s weapon down and to his left as the commander let go of his own weapon with his right hand, and spun around to his right, driving his armored elbow into the right side of the Jung soldier’s jaw.

Another Jung soldier came at the commander from his left, his own weapon coming up to his shoulder to fire. The

commander dropped to one knee, allowing the energy bolt to pass over him and slam into the Jung soldier behind him, who was still reeling from the blow to his jaw. Commander Telles then rolled to his left, striking the attacker in the shins, sending him tumbling forward. In a smooth motion, Telles rose to his feet again, fired two more shots to kill nearby targets, and then pivoted to put another in the man he had just sent tumbling. A quick lean to his right to avoid another shot, and then a jabbing motion with the butt of his rifle incapacitated another would-be attacker, after which the commander quickly drew his knife and drove it into the side of yet another Jung soldier charging toward him.

The commander paused for a moment, looking around for more targets of opportunity, as he twisted the knife and drew it upward, slicing open the man's belly. All he saw was Master Sergeant Jahal, standing on top of the bodies of three dead soldiers, watching him.

"What are you doing?" Telles wondered.

"Just watching you try to go out in grand fashion," the master sergeant replied with a grin.

"I trust this strongpoint is no longer?" Telles questioned as he withdrew his knife from the Jung soldier's belly and allowed him to fall to the ground.

"Correct."

"Then let us find another," Commander Telles said as he placed his knife back in its hip-mounted sheath. "We have many more Jung to kill this day."

Master Sergeant Jahal stepped down from the pile of bodies. "We are hearing calls from Ghatazhak squads all over the city. Civilians are joining in the fight. Some are shooting at us, and some are shooting at the Jung."

"I care not who they are shooting at," Commander Telles said as he started down the street toward the next

intersection. "If they are not Ghatazhak and they are armed, they are targets to be eliminated."

"Resistance is strong on this world, Commander. We have already lost more than one hundred men, and several squad leaders have called for precision orbital strikes."

"Then why have they not commenced?"

"Such requests must come from an officer in the field," the master sergeant reminded the commander.

The commander touched his helmet comms controls. "Aurora, Telles. Fire mission."

"I'm still seeing a lot of shuttles attempting to flee the surface," Luis reported from the Aurora's tactical station.

"Keep the Falcons and the Scouts on them," Nathan replied. "Nothing escapes."

"Captain," Ensign Souza called from the communications station at the back of the bridge, "I'm getting a request for a fire mission from our forces on the surface."

"With all the turbulence in Weldon's upper atmosphere, our accuracy is going to be decreased," Luis warned. "There's going to be a lot of collateral damage."

"Who's making the request?" Nathan asked.

"Commander Telles, sir," Ensign Souza responded.

"Pass the targeting data to tactical," Nathan ordered. He looked at his friend at the tactical station, noting the look of concern on his face. "We don't question the decisions of the guys on the ground," Nathan said, "especially when it's Telles. If he's asking for orbital strikes this early in the assault, then he's got a damned good reason. Take out every target he gives you, Lieutenant."

CHAPTER NINE

Casimir sat on the judge's bench in the middle of the vast arena, adorned in both the colors of his house, and those of Takara. The rows of seats surrounding him were filled with several thousand attendees, many of them from the noble houses of Takara, as well as members of the media covering the ten-day trial. He knew what was coming, and although he did not look forward to it, he was well aware of his responsibilities to both the people of Takara, as well as to the member worlds of the Alliance to which he had pledged his world's support.

More importantly, he had a responsibility to Nalaya, whose face was all he saw every time he looked at any of the defendant's faces. His position required his impartiality, which he could not promise. For that reason, he had insisted on a jury trial for Lord Dahra and his cohorts. He might still hold the right of passing sentence, but the guilt or innocence of those accused would be in the hands of their fellow nobles, a majority vote of which would seal their fate.

The doors on the side of the arena floor to Casimir's left opened, and the three defendants, Lord Dahra, Lord Tammer, and Lord Markly, were led in by members of the Takaran security forces. All three lords were dressed in the colors of their houses, each of them looking as if they were on their way to a meeting of Parliament, rather than about to face a verdict. Immediately behind them was their team of highly paid advocates, who had argued cleverly on their behalf, hinting at complex conspiracies and falsification of

evidence by operatives of house Takara, but in the end had been unable to prove any of their claims.

The trial had been both a serious prosecution and a circus, with the state making a clean and concise case against the three nobles, and the advocates attempting to muddle the issues at every turn. Although it made for great teasers on the daily news broadcasts, the people of Takara found the advocacy's tactics laughable, if not offensive.

Mercifully, the trial had been fast, as required by Takaran law. Although the actions of the defendants had not been directed at Takara as a whole, their attempt to assassinate the leader of a noble house for personal gain did constitute an act of treason, according to the Charter of Torrence, which both gave the noble houses their power as well as controlled that power.

The doors on the opposite side of the arena opened, and the prosecutor and his staff walked out onto the floor. The arena became quiet with anticipation, and the media began turning on their vid-cams in preparation.

Finally, the leaders of the forty-eight noble houses of Takara, including the sons of those accused, entered the room and took their seats in the jury box. Casimir looked toward his daughter, Deliza, who sat in one of the lower boxes alongside Yanni Hiller and Major Bellen, the chief of security for House Ta'Akar. She had attended every moment of the trial, sitting through endless arguments and ramblings, never breaking down, never showing anything but strength as the details of that night were repeatedly reviewed for all the people of Takara to witness. A year ago, she had been an innocent young girl living on Haven, her only care in the world being concerns of physics and computers, and perhaps a boy or two at school in town. Now she sat as the princess of Takara, first heir to the most noble

house, all of which she would gladly do without if it meant she could have her sister and her mother back.

The nobles took their seats in the jury box. Casimir cleared his throat, then turned on his microphone. "Members of the jury, have you completed your deliberations?"

Lord Banning, the most senior member of the jury stood to respond. "Yes, we have."

"As to the charge of treason against Lord Dahra, what is the count?" Casimir asked.

"The count is split, twenty-four to twenty-four."

Casimir closed his eyes to hide his disappointment from the audience. "As to the charge of treason against Lord Tammer, what is the count?"

"The count is split, twenty-four to twenty-four," Lord Banning replied.

"And the charge of treason against Lord Markly, what is the count?"

"Again, the count is split, twenty-four to twenty-four."

Casimir's heart sank. He had not expected a unanimous verdict, but he had certainly expected a majority. Now, a more difficult situation presented itself. He had no doubt that the nobles had sought to test his resolve, but they had done so at the expense of not only three of their fellow nobles, but also that of a child... his child.

Casimir took a deep breath, his eyes fixed on those of his last remaining child. "I shall not speak of my disappointment in the noble houses of Takara, nor shall I speak of the points of law that make twenty-four of your decisions obvious ploys to force my hand. Twenty-four of you have chosen to use the vagaries of Takaran law and the Charter of Torrence to steer the events in the direction of your choosing, thus placing me in the most precarious of positions."

Casimir took another deep breath before continuing. "As the leader of the most powerful noble house of Takara, and the de facto ruler of Takara due to the temporary suspension of Parliament during these hearings, the fate of these three men falls on me. As required, I shall do the impossible, and put aside my emotions as a father who has lost his child, and as a Takaran who has seen his world fall into disarray at the hands of men who care more about their fortunes and positions than the people they are sworn to protect." Casimir looked at the three defendants. "Lord Dahra, Lord Tammer, Lord Markly... I vote guilty as charged."

A low rumble of voices rose in the arena.

"You are therefore hereby convicted of treason against the Charter of Torrence and the Government of Takara, a charge for which there is normally only one sentence... that of execution."

The low rumble of voices grew more intense, rising in volume.

Casimir rose, walking around the bench and down the stairs to the floor below, as he spoke to those in attendance as well as the recently convicted nobles. "However, in the interest of peace, I offer you a concession. Admit your guilt now, before your fellow nobles and the people of Takara, and I shall spare the fortunes of your respective houses, allowing them to be passed on to your successors upon your execution, all without loss of position within Takaran society."

Casimir walked toward the three convicted nobles, becoming more empowered with every step. "Refuse my offer, and your fortunes shall be sacrificed. Your families shall become commoners, without resource or position, most likely forced to work as servants in other noble houses.

Refuse my offer, and your names shall forever carry disgrace.” Casimir’s voice become strong, and full of conviction. “Refuse my offer, and your executions shall be swift and immediate.” He stopped no more than two meters from Lord Dahra. “How say you, Lord Dahra?”

“You wouldn’t dare carry out such an execution!” Lord Markly proclaimed.

“You forget, Lord Markly, I have killed before... on many occasions, in fact, and never with more hatred than I carry at this moment,” Casimir said through gritted teeth.

“Markly is correct,” Lord Dahra stated calmly. “If you kill us, you risk a civil war, the likes of which Takara has never seen. In fact, I doubt you will find anyone willing to carry out the execution.”

“Then perhaps I shall do so myself,” Casimir replied. He moved directly in front of Lord Dahra, standing less than half a meter away. “How say you, Lord Dahra? Are you willing to confess your crimes? Are you willing to save your name and your family? Are you willing to save Takara from itself?”

Lord Dahra looked Casimir in the eye, then spoke with utter calm. “I stand by my innocence, as well as the innocence of my fellow nobles.”

“As you wish,” Casimir replied with equal calm. He put out his right hand, angling it slightly behind him. “Officer of the Guard, your weapon.”

Another rumble went up throughout the arena as the officer of the guard stepped forward.

“My lord, are you sure you...”

“Your weapon,” Casimir repeated. The officer pulled his energy pistol from his holster and handed it to Casimir, then took a step back.

The crowd became louder, not believing what they were seeing.

“Lord Dahra, Lord Tammer, Lord Markly. You have been convicted of treason against the people of Takara, and the Charter of Torrence. For this charge, the sentence is death, swift and immediate.”

“If you kill us,” Lord Dahra said under his breath, “we will become martyrs, and those who believe as us will rise up against you.”

Casimir raised his weapon and took aim at Lord Dahra’s face. “I’m counting on it,” he muttered as he pulled the trigger. His weapon fired, sending an energy bolt between the eyes of Lord Dahra. The weapon was set to a low power setting, just enough to kill instantly, but not enough to cause a gruesome spectacle. He immediately took aim at Lord Tammer and fired, then Lord Markly.

The crowd erupted in equal parts objection and approval. “I shall not tolerate those who cannot follow the laws laid down by the so-called noble houses of Takara centuries ago!” Casimir proclaimed, turning slowly as he spoke to all those in attendance. He then turned to the forty-eight nobles standing in the jury box, their mouths still agape. “Follow me, and I shall fight and die for each of you! Challenge me, and you shall die by my own hand!”

Without another word, Casimir turned to exit, handing the weapon back to the officer of the guard. He looked at Major Bellen, who was already rushing Deliza and Yanni out of the arena. The fuse had been lit. Now he just had to wait for the explosion.

* * *

Loki sat in the pilot's briefing room, spinning his stylus on the desk in front of him. It had been a grueling day, with knowledge tests, orals, and flight tests that had started at sunrise and continued nonstop through to evening. He had finished his last test flight more than an hour ago, and could be lying in his bunk, but instead he had chosen to wait for Josh. They had come this far together, and it only seemed right that they learn their respective futures in the Alliance the same way.

Loki knew that he had most likely passed the knowledge and oral tests, as such things had always come easily to him. He was also fairly certain that he had passed the flight tests as well, as despite the fact that his flying had been average, he had not busted any of the performance limitations. What he was more concerned about was Josh. His friend would undoubtedly pass the flight tests, but the knowledge tests, and especially the oral tests, might be another story altogether. It had taken Josh weeks to understand some of the most basic mathematical formulas needed, and even longer to get a good grasp of meteorology and aerodynamics. Josh was a 'throttle to the stops and blast through it' kind of pilot, which was not what the Corinari preferred.

The door swung open, and Josh came bursting into the room in his usual fashion, as if expecting everyone present to go 'yeah, Josh is here.' It was a trait that Loki had always found somewhat annoying, although he had learned to ignore it for the most part.

"You're still here," Josh exclaimed as he dropped his flight gear and continued into the room. "I figured you'd be passed out on your bunk by now."

"I don't think I'll be able to sleep until I know our results," Loki replied. "How did you do?"

"Flight test was a snap. I did like you said, and tried to fly like you. I think what I gave them was a mix... you know, a little you and a little me. The you in me kept me from being too much me, if you know what I mean. And the me in me kept me from being too..."

"I get it," Loki interrupted.

"How did you do?" Josh asked as he sat down on the desk in front of Loki.

"I think I did okay."

"Did you fly a little like me?" Josh wondered.

"No, I was afraid to."

"Wuss."

"Pretty much," Loki conceded. "How did you do on the knowledge test?"

"I'm trying to forget about that," Josh replied. "Hey, what did you answer for that question about... what was it... thrust vector angle change rate, or something like that?"

"Thrust vector sweep rate. One seven five aft, one two zero forward."

"Shit. Guess I'm headed back to Haven."

"That's only one question, Josh. There were two hundred questions on that exam."

"Yeah, well, that's not the only one I got wrong. Plus, I may have mouthed off a bit during my orals."

"You didn't insult the examiner, did you?"

"Not directly," Josh said. "I just said any idiot knew that. Turns out, he didn't... therefore..."

"Josh..."

"Hey, I talk a lot when I'm nervous."

"Or bored, or excited, or angry..."

"Alright, I get your point." Josh patted the pockets of his flight suit, looking for something. "I'm starving. You got any of those nut bars left?"

Loki pulled one out of his pocket and tossed it to Josh.
“My last one.”

“Thanks,” Josh said as he tore the wrapper open and took a bite. “Hey, if we fail, do you think they’ll give us a ride back to the Pentaurus cluster, or do you think we’ll be stuck here?”

“I’m sure they would give us a ride back, eventually. More likely we’ll go back to chauffeuring Abby to and from work.”

“No way. Don’t get me wrong, I like Abby, but that is about the most boring job there is.”

“I seriously doubt that.”

“Hell, I’d rather go back to flying a harvester,” Josh exclaimed. “At least that was actual hands-on-the-controls flying.”

The door opened again, and Major Prechitt entered the room. Josh stuffed the last of the nut bar into his mouth as he slid off the table and stood at attention next to Loki.

“As you were, gentlemen,” Major Prechitt said as he approached. He dropped his data pad on the desk and pulled up a chair from the row in front of the desk. “Take a seat.”

Loki looked at Josh as they sat.

“I have your test results from earlier, and I’ve spoken to both of your flight examiners. Normally, it would take several days for the results to be reviewed and a decision made. However, things are not normal. There are only two applicants and this is *not* the Corinari. Lucky for you, because if it were, neither of you would have passed.”

Josh’s eyes widened. He looked at Loki, then back at the major. “We passed?”

“Technically, no...”

“But you just said...”

“Like I said, times are different. The need is greater, and therefore the criteria are different.”

“Are we in or not?” Josh wondered.

“Yes, you are in. You are no longer cadets. You are now both ensigns in the Alliance.”

“Yes!” Josh leaned back in his chair, feeling relaxed for the first time in weeks.

Loki did not look as excited. “In what areas were we deficient?”

“It’s not as much a matter of deficiency,” the major explained. “You both demonstrated acceptable levels of knowledge and expertise, as well as the minimum necessary skills to serve as pilots and officers within the Alliance.”

“But you said we would not have passed had this been on Corinair?”

“I also said that this was not a normal situation.”

“So, we’re in because you have no one better,” Loki surmised.

“Who cares? We’re in,” Josh exclaimed.

“I care,” Loki insisted.

“The Corinari was composed of only the best. The requirements were so high that there were years where none of the applicants were accepted. The difference is that the Corinari were not facing a crisis, and therefore could afford to be far more particular about their applicants. The Corinari believed in a small, highly trained, exceptionally talented force. Such is not the case with the Alliance. To put it bluntly, we need butts in the cockpits. The Karuzara has at least thirty more Falcons coming off the line in the next few months. They’re useless to us without crews. So now, we look more for potential than qualifications.”

“I see.”

"You don't look happy, Ensign Sheehan," Major Prechitt said.

"I had hoped to score higher, I guess."

"Well, on the knowledge tests, you scored extremely high. High enough, in fact, that you would have been accepted even by the Corinari. However, *your* flying, while adequate, showed little in the way of instinct. You flew proficiently, executing every maneuver per protocol. That is good enough for the Alliance, but it would not have been good enough for the Corinari." The major looked at Loki. "This was to be expected, considering your original training was for flying commercial shuttles."

"I told you to fly like me," Josh said.

"Ensign Hayes, on the other hand, barely squeaked by on the knowledge test and orals. Had it not been for his exceptional piloting skills, he would not have been accepted. The bottom line is that you both have talents that the Alliance needs. We knew that from day one, otherwise we wouldn't have offered you a position."

"So you knew we'd pass?" Josh wondered, looking confused.

"It was never a matter of pass or fail with either of you," the major replied. "You had already demonstrated your skills under considerable duress. Hell, you two have more combat stick time than most Corinari pilots. We only dangled the specter of failure over your heads to motivate you... actually, more Josh than you, Loki..."

"What?" Josh exclaimed.

"...We always wanted both of you in the Alliance. We just needed you to complete some form of training so that you could operate as part of a team, rather than as a rogue ship pulling off the impossible."

"Can I just confirm a few things here?" Josh asked.

"Of course."

"Are we in the Alliance?"

"Why do you think I keep referring to you as ensigns?"

"Okay," Josh continued, "do we get to keep flying a Falcon?"

"Yes."

"Do we get to keep flying together?"

"For the most part, yes."

"What do you mean, for the most part?"

"You'll continue flying missions together," Major Prechitt explained, "but we also want you both to help train incoming flight crews."

Josh's eyes widened, his head jerking back slightly. "Whoa. I didn't see that one coming."

"You want us to train people?" Loki seemed equally surprised.

"The two of you are a great team," Major Prechitt said. "Each of you brings what the other doesn't have. For a Falcon, you're a perfect pair. Wild abandon coupled with natural instinct in the front seat, discipline and analysis in the back seat."

"Pardon, sir," Loki interrupted, "but surely there are better choices for instructors?"

"Actually, everyone is going to be doing some instructing. We don't have that many flight crews left, but we do have quite a few applicants."

"Do the applicants even know how to fly?" Josh asked.

"Most of them do, yes. Right now, though, we only need about fifty pilots. Thirty of them for Falcons, and the other twenty for Eagles."

"Then back-seaters in Falcons won't be pilots?" Loki asked.

"For now. We simply don't have enough applicants with flight experience. Besides, in order to piece together so many Falcons, they needed to remove the flight controls from the second seats. Of the twelve Falcons still flying with dual flight controls, eight of them will have the second set removed, and the remaining four will be taken off the combat line to be used as trainers."

"Is that really necessary?" Loki wondered.

"It is if we're going to upgrade your weapons."

"We're getting bigger guns?" Josh wondered.

"The plan is to combine your weapons bays into one large bay to hold a plasma torpedo cannon. We're also thickening the outer aspect of your wings to accommodate mini-plasma turrets. So, you'll need the extra room in the back of the cockpit for the additional weapons control systems."

"Won't that create a drag problem?" Loki wondered. "The Falcon is not great in aerodynamic flight as it is. She just makes up for it with brute force."

"The role of the Falcon is changing. When is the last time you flew from the surface to orbit or vice versa?"

"We always jump," Josh replied. "Saves time and propellant."

"Exactly."

"What about ground-support missions?" Loki asked.

"You'll still fly them, at least for a while. Eventually, that role will be handled by combat jump shuttles and Kalibri airships."

"If I'm not going to have flight controls in the back, what am I supposed to do when Josh is being an idiot?"

"Reach forward and smack him on the side of the head," Major Prechitt said, a smile on his face.

"He's usually wearing a helmet."

“Then smack him harder.” Major Prechitt stood. “Congratulations, Ensigns. Now, get some rest. You’ve earned it.”

“Thank you, sir,” Loki said, standing as well and shaking the major’s hand.

“Thank you, sir,” Josh said, following Loki’s example.

Major Prechitt turned and left the room. Josh turned to Loki and hugged him. “Thanks, Loki,” he said. “I never would have made it without you.”

* * *

Doctor Galloway ran down the corridor of the hospital and turned the corner, bursting through the double doors that led into the nanite therapy unit. She stopped short as she approached treatment bay four, the location of the code call. Inside she could see the code team working on Mister Abarta, doing everything they could to revive the husband and father of four, who had suffered from radiation exposure during the last bombardment of Earth by the Jung.

She watched for several minutes. She wanted to go in and help, but the room was already full of medical professionals who were trained for this particular situation. She knew that on Corinair, the patient had a far better chance of survival, but she was forced to work with what they had available to them on Earth. In many cases, it was better to let the medical professionals of Earth provide the care, as despite the fact that their medical technologies were inferior to that of Corinair, they had far more experience operating with what they had available.

Soon the efforts ceased, and the code team started filing out of the treatment bay, to be replaced by those who handled the bodies of the deceased. She looked at Doctor

Hammond, the young doctor with whom she had worked closely for the last few weeks, as he came out of Mister Abarta's bay.

"Full systems failure," Doctor Hammond said.

"I will need to examine the nanites still within him," Doctor Galloway replied.

"I'll see to it," Doctor Hammond promised, continuing on to the exit.

Doctor Galloway turned and watched him go, then turned back to face treatment bay four. Mister Abarta lay there, motionless, his breathing tube still sticking out of his mouth, his IVs still connected to his arms and neck. All she could think about was that the man should have lived. His exposure, although severe, should have been healed by the nanites.

She could only pray that his death would ultimately reveal the cause of the nanite failures, and therefore prevent the scene from repeating itself again and again in the days and weeks to come.

* * *

Captain Navarro stepped out of his personal shuttle and onto the poorly lit tarmac at the Torrence spaceport. He looked about, pulling his collar up against the chilly night air. As usual, the tiny island of Torrence was shrouded in fog. He stepped forward, making room for three Ghatazhak soldiers to disembark as well, one of whom was an officer. The four of them began the short walk across the open pavement toward another shuttle in the distance.

The door on the other shuttle opened, and a well-dressed gentleman not much older than Navarro stepped out and

began to walk toward him. "Captain Navarro," the gentleman greeted.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure," Captain Navarro said as he approached.

"Names are not important," the man replied. "However, if you require one, you may call me Illya."

"I was told there was a matter of the utmost urgency to discuss," Captain Navarro stated, one eyebrow raised.

"Odd that you should come in the company of such men," the man called Illya stated, pointing at the Ghatazhak.

"These are dangerous times," Captain Navarro stated. "One cannot be too careful, especially when asked to meet in a remote location, in clandestine fashion... and with a man known only as 'Illya'."

"I see your point," Illya replied. "However, you have nothing to fear, my dear captain. Had my employers wished you dead, you would already be so."

"Should I take that as a threat?" Captain Navarro wondered.

"Indeed, no. I am merely stating fact. Besides, what possible gain could there be by killing the captain of the Avendahl?"

"Or the murder of a young girl?"

"Collateral damage," Illya replied.

"Perhaps you should say what you wish me to hear," Navarro said, "or rather, what your employers wish me to hear."

"I assume you are aware of recent events, so I shall not waste your time reviewing them. Suffice to say that a change is coming... a change both swift and sure."

"What is this change to which you refer?"

“Legal concerns prevent me from speaking freely about such matters, lest I be labeled a conspirator. I am merely a messenger. However, this change will require all the noble houses of Takara to choose a side.”

“Meaning for, or against House Ta’Akar,” Navarro surmised.

“A logical assumption on your part, I’m sure.”

“You do realize that as an officer in service of Takara, I could arrest you for acts of treason?”

“I have committed no such offense,” Illya insisted. “I have merely made an observation based on current events and public opinion. One that includes those of my employers.”

“Regardless...”

“Arresting me would serve no purpose,” Illya said. “I am expendable. I would perish within minutes of my arrest, leaving you with nothing but explanations to make to the authorities, I’m afraid.”

Captain Navarro sighed. “I grow tired of the cold ocean air, and of your melodramatic conversational style, Mister Illya. Convey directly what your employers wish me to hear or be on your way.”

“Side with my employers, and you shall be handsomely rewarded. Side with House Ta’Akar, and your only reward shall be death. Death for you, *and* your entire house.”

Commander Erbe drew his sidearm in the blink of an eye, taking aim at Illya’s forehead. “Allow me the honor, my captain.”

Captain Navarro placed his hand on the top of Commander Erbe’s sidearm, pushing it gently downward. “You have delivered your message.” He looked Illya in the eyes. “Now it is time for you to leave.”

"Of course," Illya replied, trying to be as gracious as possible. "Perhaps you have a message of your own for me to deliver to my employers?"

"You may tell your employers that Captain Suvan Navarro, leader of House Navarro and commander of the Avendahl, shall do what he believes to be the right thing for all of Takara, if and when such action becomes necessary. You may also tell your employers that any action against House Navarro will be met with the full force of the Avendahl, regardless of which 'side' takes such action."

"As you wish, my lord." Illya bowed politely and took several steps backward before turning around and boarding his shuttle.

Captain Suvan turned and headed back to his own shuttle.

"You should have let me kill the little *bezatte*," Commander Erbe grumbled.

"I'm sure the opportunity will present itself again, Commander," Captain Navarro said as he headed up the ramp to his shuttle, "and soon."

* * *

Doctor Hammond looked at the clock on the wall of treatment bay seven. "That's it, people. Time of death, fifteen twenty." He pulled his gloves off as he headed for the door, tossing them into the bio-hazard receptacle by the door on his way out.

"That's the fifth one in the last twenty-four hours," Doctor Galloway said as Doctor Hammond approached.

"I have the results from Mister Abarta's autopsy, Doctor," the nurse said as she handed a data pad to Doctor Galloway.

Doctor Galloway took the data pad. "It's about time."

"They're just as overloaded as we are," Doctor Hammond said.

"Of course." Doctor Galloway studied the results on the data pad, her eyes narrowing and her eyebrows furrowed.

"What is it?" Doctor Hammond asked, noticing her concerned expression.

"This is all wrong," she said, as she began flipping through the pages on the data pad. "Nanite counts, composition, groupings... this doesn't make sense. Some of them are still active."

"Is that abnormal?"

"Once the body dies, the nanites are supposed to shut down."

"Are you saying they're trying to revive a dead man?"

"No, nothing like that. There's no evidence that the nanites in Mister Abarta's body ever did any repair work whatsoever." She continued flipping through pages on the data pad.

"That would mean they were all bad, right? How is that possible?"

"Oh, my God," Doctor Galloway exclaimed, her eyes widening as she studied a close-up image of some of the nanites recovered during the autopsy. "These are not our nanites."

"What?" Doctor Hammond's mouth dropped open. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, these are not Corinairan nanites."

"Then whose are they?"

Doctor Galloway looked at Doctor Hammond. "I do not know."

* * *

"Captain, communications," the voice called over the intercom in Captain Navarro's office on board the Avendahl.

Captain Navarro set down his tablet and pressed the intercom button. "Go ahead."

"Sir, we have received a distress call from the Takaran merchant vessel 'Willamay'. She is under attack by what they believe to be Ybaran pirates."

"Position?"

"She is en route to Takar from Savoy. Shipping lane one four seven, one point seven two seven light years from Savoy. She was forced to drop out of FTL to raise her shields."

"Have the XO meet me in the IIC," Captain Navarro ordered.

"Aye, sir."

Captain Navarro rose from his desk and exited his office, turning to his left to head for the Avendahl's Information and Intelligence Center. As with all the critical areas of the Avendahl's command deck, it was only a few steps from the captain's office. Unlike the frigates and cruisers on which he had previously served, the sheer size of the Avendahl required many more sub-departments in order to operate smoothly. The result of this was that the captain spent far more time in his office than on the bridge or in the CIC. In fact, there were times when he felt more like a figurehead than the captain of a ship, as the day-to-day operational decisions were made mostly by his junior officers. His main decisions involved when and where to move his ship, and what, if necessary, to do with the power that it was capable of projecting.

Captain Navarro entered the IIC. The room was vast and dimly lit, and like most other operational hubs, the rows of technicians and operators encircled a central platform, with

each successive ring outward from center sitting slightly lower. Unlike other compartments, the arrival of a command officer was not announced. The men in this room were constantly busy monitoring communications signals, sensor tracks, and reviewing news reports in the area. With such information, the senior analysts would try to predict the actions of every player, both big and small. From noble houses to trade markets, local socio-economics and politics to interstellar relations, the officers who ran the IIC knew better than anyone what was going on in the Pentaurus cluster, and especially in the Takar system.

"Commander," Captain Navarro greeted as he approached his executive officer.

The Avendahl's executive officer, Commander Golan, stood next to Commander Saray at the large display table in the center of the room. "Captain."

"How much confidence do we have in this distress call?" Captain Navarro asked Commander Saray.

"There have been reports of Ybaran pirates attacking merchant vessels," the commander admitted. "However, all such reports have come from well outside the Pentaurus cluster. The most recent was an attack on a Volonese ore ship leaving Haven."

"Takaran forces never confirmed that report," Commander Golan reminded.

"Correct," Commander Saray confirmed. "The Haven Corporation claims to have thwarted that attack."

"Haven Corp are a bunch of thugs," Captain Navarro commented.

"Also correct," Commander Saray agreed.

Commander Golan looked at his captain. "I take it you have your doubts as to the authenticity of this distress call?"

"Wouldn't you?" Captain Navarro replied. "For all we know, Haven Corp are the ones initiating the attacks." Captain Navarro turned to Commander Saray. "How long will the Willamay's shields hold out?"

"Ten minutes, maximum, *if* their armaments and numbers are similar to previously reported attacks."

"I assume that the message was transmitted via one of the Willamay's jump comm-drones?"

"Correct," Commander Saray replied. "That was two minutes ago."

Captain Navarro thought for a second.

"If we leave, and it is a diversion..." Commander Golan began.

"...Then something is going to happen here in the Takar system during our absence. However, we do have a responsibility to protect Takaran merchant ships, and those ships are owned by other noble houses. *Not* taking action to protect them could also fan the flames that are building on Takara." Captain Navarro took a breath. "Which strike group has the ready duty?"

"Four," Commander Golan answered.

"Commander Merritt. Good. We can trust him. Scramble the ready group, immediately."

"The full group?" the XO asked.

"Twelve, six, and two. Instruct them to respond to any illegal movements within the Takar system."

"Rules of Engagement?"

"Maximum force, but try not to fire the first shot, if possible."

"Aye, sir," the XO replied. He picked up a communications handset hanging from the side of the table.

"Flight ops, XO."

"*XO, go for flight ops.*"

"Flight ops, XO. Scramble Ready Four, full group. This is not a drill."

"Scramble Ready Four, full group, this is not a drill, aye," the flight control officer replied.

"Once Commander Merritt is away, send him his ROE and tell him we will be departing the area for what we *hope* will be a brief time."

"I take it we're going to answer the Willamay's distress call?"

"Correct," Captain Navarro answered. "Prepare the next ready group. I want them launch capable in five minutes."

"Aye, sir."

Captain Navarro picked up another handset. "Bridge, Captain."

"Bridge, Lieutenant Commander Hyam," the officer of the watch replied over the comms.

"Plot an intercept for the Willamay's position, and jump us as soon as the ready group is clear."

"Intercept jump is already plotted, sir."

"Very well," Captain Navarro replied. "Set action stations on all decks. Execute the jump when ready. I'll be there shortly."

"Aye, sir."

The action stations alert klaxon sounded in the corridors outside the IIC, and the condition display on the wall changed to orange, indicating that the ship was readying itself for combat, although it was not yet charging up its most powerful weapons.

"Gentlemen," Captain Navarro said as he turned to exit the IIC. "Let's go to work."

* * *

Captain Nash sat in the wardroom of Scout Three, staring at the time displays over the compartment's forward hatch. They had been orbiting a hunk of rock and ice nearly a hundred kilometers in diameter located at the outer edges of the Tau Ceti system for a month, waiting for some word from Lieutenant Commander Nash and her team on the surface of Kohara, the most populated of the system's three inhabited planets.

He had every reason to worry. He had expected them to return more than a week ago, and although their failure to do so did not mean they were in trouble, it did mean that something had not gone according to plan. It was that 'something' that bothered him.

Robert Nash had joined the EDF when his sister was still in diapers. Although he had been away for most of her life, he had always made a point of spending as much time as possible with her, and her slightly older brother, whenever he had been able. Still, it had only been recently, since he had been awakened by the Aurora, that they had become close.

Robert tried to tell himself that his little sister was a tough, resourceful woman, and a highly trained special operations agent. She was as qualified as anyone, perhaps more so due to her recent experiences in the field. *How many people did she say she had killed? Thirty? Forty?* It was unfathomable to him, for when he looked at her face, he didn't see a hardened warrior, capable of killing at a moment's notice. He still saw that cute little tomboy who was always trying to keep up with her older brothers. He still saw the preteen who would rather listen to him tell stories about life in the Earth Defense Force than hang out in the shopping district with her friends and look at boys.

He looked at the time display again, just as it changed to a new hour. Regardless of his concerns over his little sister's welfare, he had a job to do. He rose from his seat and headed toward the forward hatch into the EVA compartment. He made his way through the compartment, around the ladder, and then through the next hatchway leading forward, stepping into the systems compartment. "Wellsy, anything?"

Ensign Wells looked at his Captain. "Sorry, sir. Nothing new. Just the same old bullshit broadcasts."

"Where's Scalotti?"

"Aft, trying to find a way to boost the gain on the comm dish. We thought that maybe, if their jump sub is damaged and they can't get back, they might try to send a signal some other way."

"Did it work?"

"So far, we can just hear the same bullshit, but better."

Captain Nash took a deep breath and sighed. "Well, we can't wait any longer. They'll just have to fend for themselves until the battle is over."

"Yes, sir."

"Wake the rest of them up, Wellsy," Captain Nash said as he ascended the ladder to the flight deck. "It's time to head home."

* * *

"Captain on the bridge," the guard at the entrance to the Avendahl's bridge announced as Captain Navarro entered.

"Strike Group Four is away, Captain," Lieutenant Commander Hyam reported. "Jump board is green, all stations report ready for action."

"Very well," Captain Navarro replied as he took his seat in the middle of the large circular room. "Status of the second ready group?"

"Strike Group One is on deck and ready to launch," the flight operations officer reported from behind the captain. "Strike Groups Two and Three are on standby."

"Attention all hands," the jump control officer called over the ship-wide address system, "Prepare to jump in ten seconds."

Captain Navarro could hear the voices of the section controllers on the next ring of controllers below the primary level, as each reported their readiness for the jump to the officer in control of that particular level.

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump."

As usual, nothing spectacular occurred on the Avendahl's bridge. Without any view of the outside, their only indication of the jump was a sudden spike in the output levels of the twelve hundred emitters on the Avendahl's outer hull. A slight shift in the measured distances to certain stars used as navigational markers provided confirmation that a jump had indeed occurred, and that the Avendahl was now located in a different region of space.

"Transition complete," the jump control officer reported confidently.

"Position verified," the Avendahl's navigator, Lieutenant Sturvont reported. "One point seven two seven light years from the Savoy system, with shipping lane one four seven fifteen hundred kilometers to port, twenty down relative."

"Sensor contacts," Lieutenant Cahnis reported. "The Willamay, and six other targets. Fast movers. Initial profile suggests either Ybaran or Palean design. They are attacking the Willamay. Her shields are at twenty percent and falling."

"Launch Ready One," Captain Navarro ordered.

"Launching Ready One," the flight operations officer acknowledged.

"Notify Ready One strike leader that they are to dispatch the attackers with maximum force and take up escort of the Willamay until our return," Captain Navarro continued.

"Estimated time of return?" the flight operations officer inquired.

"Unknown. We will dispatch a jump tanker if delayed."

"Aye, sir."

"Communications, let the Willamay know that help is forthcoming."

"Aye, sir," the communications officer replied.

"Strike Group One is launching now," the flight control officer reported. "All elements will be away in two minutes."

"Very well," Captain Navarro replied. "Lieutenant Sturvont, prepare a jump back to the Takar system. We will return as soon as Strike Group One is clear."

"Preparing a jump back to Takaran space," the navigator acknowledged.

"The Willamay's shields are down to twelve percent," the sensor officer reported.

"The first fighters will be in attack position in thirty seconds," the flight control officer added, knowing that it would be the captain's next question.

"New contact," Lieutenant Cahnis announced. "Frigate. Two hundred kilometers. Ten to port, forty-two up relative." The sensor officer turned to face Captain Navarro, surprise on his face. "It's the Clarkson, sir."

"What?" the captain said, equally surprised. "The Clarkson was lost during the attacks on Takara by the Alliance. The Aurora destroyed her!"

"It's the Clarkson, Captain, I'm sure of it."

"Bonvaneer! That greedy old bastard!" Captain Navarro exclaimed. "Charge the main guns! Target the Clarkson!"

"Captain, what if she's here to help?"

"After having been missing all this time? Not likely."

"The Clarkson is firing!"

"Shields up!" Captain Navarro ordered.

"Raising shields," the defense systems control officer replied.

"Charging main guns," the weapons officer reported. "Targeting the Clarkson."

"Communications. Warn the Clarkson," Captain Navarro said. "Stand down or be destroyed. You have thirty seconds to comply."

"Aye, sir."

"Strike Group One is away," the flight control officer announced.

The first blast of energy struck the Avendahl's forward shields, causing no more than a mild shaking of the deck beneath Captain Navarro's feet.

"She's firing again," Lieutenant Cahnis reported.

"Main guns at full power," the weapons officer announced.

"Time?" the captain asked.

"Ten seconds."

"Hold your fire for ten seconds," the captain ordered as the Avendahl vibrated from the impact of the Clarkson's second shot.

"Our fighters have destroyed the attacking ships," Lieutenant Cahnis reported.

"The Clarkson's captain must be an idiot," the weapons officer commented. "He doesn't stand a chance against our weapons."

"Can she make FTL again?" Captain Navarro asked his sensor officer.

"Doubtful, she's lost too many emitters," Lieutenant Cahnis answered. "The Clarkson is turning away and accelerating at her maximum rate. They're firing again."

"Thirty seconds has passed, Captain," the communications officer reported.

"Clarkson is funneling all power to her aft shields, Captain," Lieutenant Cahnis reported.

"She wants us to chase her," Captain Navarro realized. "That's why they're not going to FTL." He turned aft. "How many shots to kill the Clarkson?"

"With all her shield power channeled into her aft shields, ten to twelve direct hits, at least."

"That will take too long," Captain Navarro said. "Helm, best speed. Force her to accelerate even further, I need her away from the Willamay."

"Aye, sir," the helmsman answered. "Going to maximum acceleration."

"Flight," the captain continued, "launch a jump shuttle to rescue the crew of the Willamay. As soon as that crew is recovered, have them jump back to Takaran space and wait for us there."

"Aye, sir."

"Also, recall the strike group. I need them on the deck as quickly as possible."

"Captain," Lieutenant Cahnis interrupted, "the Willamay isn't unstable, sir. She just can't go to FTL."

"Weapons, keep one gun on the Willamay and prepare to fire."

"Sir?"

"As long as the Willamay is a target, we're stuck here," Captain Navarro explained. "That's why the Clarkson is

here, to keep us from returning to Takara."

"Aye, sir," the weapons officer acknowledged. "Pardon my ignorance, Captain, but why not just destroy the Clarkson?" he added as politely as possible.

"When their shields get low enough, they'll simply slip to FTL. They only mean to keep us here for a few minutes."

"Captain, without fighter cover, the rescue shuttle will be vulnerable," the flight control officer reminded the captain.

"At her current rate of acceleration and distance, how long for the Clarkson to get fighters to the Willamay?" Captain Navarro asked.

"Three minutes at the most."

"Rescue shuttle is away," the flight control officer announced. "Rear elements of Ready One are landing now. Estimate two minutes until all elements are within our jump-field perimeter."

"Helm, be ready for hard about as soon as the last element of Ready One is on board."

"Aye, sir."

"As soon as we come around, jump us back to Takaran space, Mister Sturvont."

"The jump is already plotted, sir."

"Captain, if we jump away before the rescue shuttle..."

"Tell the rescue shuttle to jump clear if attacked," Captain Navarro ordered, "with or without the Willamay's crew."

CHAPTER TEN

For the first time since they had awakened days ago, the main door to their room opened, and two armed guards entered the room, moving to either side of the doorway.

Jessica rose from her bed, looking the two men over. She looked at Naralena. "I think I can take them."

"That would be ill-advised," a voice said from the doorway. An older man appeared, younger than Ellyus had been, but older than either Jessica or Naralena. His hair was grayed, and his skin appeared weathered from too much sun, yet he looked quite fit despite his years. "These men have been trained by the Jung."

"How is that possible?" Jessica wondered.

"Because they were once Jung soldiers."

Jessica looked at the two men, then at the old man. "What, like defectors or something?"

"In a manner of speaking, but we can discuss that later. First, I'd like to know who you are, and why you have come to Kohara."

"We're on vacation?" Jessica said, a sarcastic smile on her face.

"Odd then, that you were hiding in a private suite of a Jung operative, and were about to be apprehended *by* the Jung."

"It was all a misunderstanding," Jessica said. "We were just here on business. Real estate business..."

"Perhaps I should have started with this. Sierra seven seven five echo," the old man challenged.

"Hold on, let me do the math," Jessica said, her eyes rolling upward as she made the mental calculations. "Delta delta one four... wait, make that one *three* five x-ray." She shrugged. "Math was never my thing."

"Correct, nonetheless. I am Gerard Bowden."

"Jessica Nash. This is Naralena Avakian. How long have you been on Kohara?"

"Twenty-seven years."

"Your assignment?" Jessica wondered.

"To discover what happened to all the other operatives."

"And what did you discover?"

"That they had all been captured, thanks to Ellyus Barton."

"So he *was* a spy."

"We call them 'peepers'."

"Yeah, I heard one of your men use that term. Why peepers?"

"The Jung use nanites to procure information from the public. That is why we were so concerned when we discovered nanites in your bloodstream. To our knowledge, the Earth does not yet possess nanotechnology."

"We don't. They're Corinairan."

"I'm not familiar with the term," Gerard admitted.

"Long story," Jessica replied. "How do the Jung get the nanites into people?"

"Through various vaccines, medical injections... anything that is injected into the veins by the Jung is bound to contain their nanites."

"Corinairan nanites are used to heal injuries and cure diseases," Naralena said.

"May I?" Gerard asked, pointing toward one of the chairs at the table.

Jessica sat back down on the edge of her bed, facing Gerard as he took a seat at the table.

"Jung nanites attach themselves to the sensory nerves of the host," Gerard explained. "They collect information, like tiny recorders."

"How do they get the information back to the Jung?" Jessica wondered.

"Whenever the host passes through a security checkpoint, the scanning tunnel activates the transmitters in the nanites which then broadcast the information. When the Jung find something interesting, they get close enough to that particular host to transmit new instructions to the nanites. The nanites then begin to replicate themselves using resources within the host's body. Eventually, the host becomes so saturated with Jung nanites that the Jung can actually take physical control over the host, causing them to perform actions on the Jung's behalf."

"Does the host even know that they're doing things for the Jung?"

"No, they do not," Gerard said. "Most of the time, the additional nanites only give the Jung the ability to monitor the target host's senses at will. Higher-value hosts are programmed to transmit gathered information upon receiving an activation signal."

"Don't tell me," Jessica said, "a blank stare lasting a few seconds to a few minutes?"

"Something like that, yes."

"Fuck," Jessica said, her head hanging down.

"You couldn't have known," Naralena said, trying to offer comfort.

"There was nothing that could have been done for him," Gerard insisted. "Once they become that saturated, it is nearly impossible to get all the Jung nanites out of them."

"You don't understand," Jessica said. "He's not the only one. Besides, we're about to clean all Jung out of the Tau Ceti system. We might not have been able to get the nanites out of him, but if there weren't any Jung around..."

"What do you mean you're about to clean all Jung out of the system?" Gerard asked.

"Wait. How do I know you're not full of Jung nanites?"

"Trust me, we take great pains to ensure that no one in our ranks carry Jung nanites. Besides, no signals can get in or out of this facility without our permission. Now, what were you saying about an attack?"

"It's coming in about a week."

"That's not possible," Gerard insisted. "Even if all of Earth's Defender-class ships were made FTL-capable, which is unthinkable, they still wouldn't stand a chance against the Jung forces in this system."

"We lost all the Defender-class ships months ago when the Jung invaded the Sol system."

"Then what are you attacking with?"

"The Aurora," Jessica replied. "Oh, and three of those Scout ships... the ones that brought you guys here. That, and a bunch of KKV's."

"What are KKV's?" Gerard wondered.

"Kinetic Kill Vehicles. Really just converted Takaran comm-drones that travel about ten times light. They're great at taking out battle platforms and such."

"Takaran?"

"Another long story," Jessica insisted. "Trust me, a lot has changed over the last year."

"Regardless, the kind of attack you are describing is logistically impossible. It would take too much time to get all these KKV's into proper strike position, not to mention coordinating their launch over a distance of more than a

light year. How would you be able to calculate the position of the targets? How would you get your ships into position without being detected? How would..."

"Trust me on this, Gerard," Jessica interrupted. "We've done it before, and we can do it again. Granted, the Tau Ceti system presents a bigger challenge than previous systems. You've got three inhabited worlds, and double the battle platforms and battle ships."

"How many systems have you done this with?"

"By now, four. Tau Ceti is next, then Delta Pavonis. We're clearing out a twenty-light-year radius area from Sol, to buy the Earth time to recover and rebuild."

"How many Jung ships did these other systems have?" Gerard asked.

"Most of them had a battle platform, a battleship, a couple cruisers, and some frigates."

"But you said the Tau Ceti system has double the ships."

"That's right."

"I'm afraid you are mistaken," Gerard said. "There are two more battleships parked in orbit over Itimor, for a total of four."

"Where the fuck is Itimor?" Jessica wondered.

"A moon orbiting the third gas giant in the system, one the locals call Tandra. The Jung moved them there months ago, after they learned of the liberation of Earth."

"Months? By our calculation, they won't receive word for about ten more days. That's why we're attacking in..." Again Jessica looked up while she did the math. "Five or six days, I think."

"On what basis did you come up with that projection?" Gerard asked.

"The Jung's top FTL speed is twenty times light."

"For their ships, yes. Their comm-drones can go one hundred times light. Not all of them, mind you. Only the newer versions."

"Shit. You're saying they already know?"

"They must," Gerard said. "That would explain why they moved those two ships into hiding."

"Do they know about the KKV's?" Jessica asked.

"I would expect not. Otherwise they would have dispersed all of their largest assets. Put them on randomly changing orbits to make them harder to target." Gerard looked at Jessica with a deadly serious expression. "Please tell me you didn't tell all of this to Ellyus Barton."

"I may have hinted that something was going to happen, but I never gave him any details." Jessica hung her head down again. "Oh, fuck. I don't get it. Why didn't the Jung hide a few battle platforms as well?"

"Itimor is not that big," Gerard explained. "However, it does produce a rather strong radioactive signature that obscures sensors to some degree. As long as the ships are running with only basic systems powered up, it is enough to hide the battleships. Battle platforms cannot operate in states of reduced emissions as well as battleships. Can the Aurora take out a battleship?"

"Yes, but it's not easy. Two would be near impossible. If the Celestia was combat ready, we probably could handle them, but..."

"The Celestia?"

"Yet another long story." Jessica shook her head. "We have to find a way to get word to the Aurora, let her know that she's flying into an ambush."

"I'm afraid the situation is more dire than you realize," Gerard admitted. "You have been here for more than five days."

"But we witnessed five day and night cycles through the skylight," Naralena said.

"This facility is deep underground. It protects us against the unlikely event that a Jung, nanite-infested host makes it into our company."

"The day night thing was a fake?" Naralena realized.

"To confuse and disorient," Jessica said.

"More to help keep your natural biorhythms intact," Gerard corrected.

"How long have we been in here?" Jessica asked.

"Ten Koharan days," Gerard admitted.

"That means the attack is coming, what... tomorrow? The next day maybe?"

"How many Earth days did you have from the time your ship arrived on Kohara until the scheduled attack?"

"Thirty-three days," Jessica replied.

"Then the attack you speak of will occur tomorrow."

"Then we have to do something. Don't you guys have a transmitter or something?"

"We do not. The Jung monitor everything. We don't even use personal comm-units for fear of detection."

"There's got to be some way of transmitting a message," Jessica insisted. "What about the Jung? Surely they have comm systems to communicate with their ships in the system?"

"Yes, but they are heavily guarded. We would never be able to seize one, let alone get a message out."

"What about the entertainment stations?" Naralena wondered.

"They do not broadcast over the air," Gerard said.

"But they used to, didn't they?" Naralena said.

"The emergency broadcast network," Jessica remembered.

"I had forgotten," Gerard realized. "There are nodes at every broadcast facility to keep the public informed in the case of a massive network outage, but I doubt it is strong enough to get a clear signal beyond low orbit."

"It doesn't have to," Jessica replied.

* * *

"Transition complete," the Avendahl's jump control officer announced.

"Contacts!" Lieutenant Cahnis reported from the sensor station. He looked over the shoulders at the displays of his four sensor operators, quickly gathering information. "Multiple unidentified targets, in the vicinity of the Ghatazhak storage array!"

"Captain!" the flight control officer interrupted. "Strike Group One reports they are engaged with twenty-eight targets. Twenty Ybaran fast-attack ships, and eight boxcars!"

"Captain, I'm only picking up fourteen friendlies," Lieutenant Cahnis said.

Lieutenant Commander Getty looked at his flight status display. "Confirmed. Strike Group One has lost four fighters and two gunships."

"Launch the next ready group," Captain Navarro ordered.

"Launching Strike Group Two," Lieutenant Commander Getty acknowledged.

Captain Navarro turned toward his flight control officer, just in time to notice his Ghatazhak contingent commander entering the bridge. "Time to intercept?" he asked the flight controller.

"Ready group will be off the deck in one minute," Lieutenant Commander Getty replied. "Time to intercept,

launch plus eighty seconds.”

“Captain, there are four Ghatazhak deployment pods missing from the array,” the sensor officer reported. “Two more boxcars are moving into position. They mean to snatch more pods.”

“How many are left on the array?”

“Eight total.”

“If they get two more, both sides will be at equal strength,” Commander Erbe said as he stepped up onto the command platform next to Captain Navarro.

“Assuming they don’t have more of the Ybaran Legions at their disposal,” Captain Navarro replied.

“Indeed. It would be best to prevent any further acquisitions, Captain, regardless of the cost.”

Captain Navarro looked at Commander Erbe, realizing what he was suggesting. “Weapons, can you get a clear shot on those boxcars?”

“Negative, sir,” Lieutenant Rogal answered. “Too many friendlies in the way.”

“If any more boxcars manage to steal a Ghatazhak deployment pod, destroy them.”

“I don’t think I can destroy the target without destroying the pod, sir,” the lieutenant warned.

“I wasn’t asking you to, Lieutenant,” Captain Navarro replied.

“Understood, sir,” the lieutenant acknowledged.

“Jump event! New contact!” Lieutenant Cahnis reported. “Cruiser.” The lieutenant looked at the display screen for a moment. “It’s the Tontakeen,” he exclaimed with relief.

“Her status?”

“She’s powering up her shields and weapons,” the lieutenant replied. “I believe she means to join the fight. She’s launching fighters.”

"Captain!" the communications officer called out. "Incoming message from the Tontakeen. They're ordering us to stand down and withdraw!"

"What?" Captain Navarro replied, spinning around to face his communications officer.

"We're being targeted!" Lieutenant Cahnis reported.

"They must have made her captain an offer he could not refuse," Commander Erbe mumbled.

"Raise shields!" Captain Navarro ordered. "Weapons! Target the Tontakeen with all main guns! Fire at will!"

"Targeting the Tontakeen with all guns!" Lieutenant Rogal acknowledged.

"If they can get to Tenore, they can get to others," Commander Erbe said. "The stolen Ghatazhak may be the least of our worries."

"Launch the next ready group," Captain Navarro added.

"She's firing!" Lieutenant Cahnis reported.

"Main batteries locked on the Tontakeen," the weapons officer announced. "Firing!"

"Scrambling Strike Group Three," the flight control officer acknowledged. "They'll be off the deck in two minutes."

"Why so long?"

"Group two just got off the deck, sir. The next ready group was just moving into position."

"The Tontakeen and the Juda are the only other jump-capable ships in the fleet," the captain said as the first of the Tontakeen's plasma shots struck their shields. "The Clarkson and the Crippin are FTL ships and are too far out to be a threat."

"Impact, number twelve shield. Port side, forward quarter," Lieutenant Cahnis reported. "Shield strength diminished by five percent. Target is continuing to fire."

"If they have both jump ships..." Commander Erbe began.

"Direct hits to her forward shields!" Lieutenant Rogal reported.

"Target's forward shields down by twenty percent," Lieutenant Cahnis added.

"The Avendahl can handle two heavy cruisers," Captain Navarro insisted.

"Two heavy cruisers with jump drives?" Commander Erbe asked.

"I did not say it would be easy," Captain Navarro replied.

"Impact, same shield. Down ten percent," the sensor officer reported.

"Damage control reports loss of shield generator twenty-seven," the damage control officer reported. "They are channeling power from backups now."

"Loss?"

"Two percent to forward shields across the board. We can channel power from the aft shields..."

"No, that's what they want. They have jump-capable gunships, the same as us. Rather a bloody nose than broken legs," the captain said.

"Direct hits to their forward shields again!" Lieutenant Rogal reported. "They're at fifty percent."

"Continue firing," the captain replied. He turned to his sensor officer. "How many bandits in the air now?"

"Forty-seven enemy fighters are now in the engagement zone, along with four... make that three boxcars and now eight gunships."

"Target the boxcars," Captain Navarro ordered. "Helm, move us in between the Tontakeen and the Ghatazhak array. Once the boxcars are destroyed, they will try to destroy the array to keep those troops out of our hands."

"Aye, sir," the helmsman acknowledged.

"Two more jump events!" Lieutenant Cahnis reported. "Gunships, on the other side of the array. They're targeting our gunships."

"Gunship Four Two has been hit!" the flight controller said.

"One of their boxcars has acquired another pod," the sensor officer announced.

"Flight! Have all ships near the array target that..."

"The boxcar has jumped away!" Lieutenant Cahnis interrupted. "The Tontakeen is changing course, sir! She's turning toward the array!"

"All ships, protect the array," Captain Navarro ordered. "Helm, how long until we're blocking the Tontakeen's line of fire to the array?"

"Fifteen seconds, sir!"

"Best speed?"

"We are, sir."

"Pound that ship, Rogal," Captain Navarro urged.

"I am, sir," the lieutenant assured him, "but she's got ZPEDs too. Her shields are tough to get through."

"Ten seconds," the helmsman reported.

"Add in the kinetics," Captain Navarro ordered. "Lock all missile batteries on that ship as well. Her captain needs something to think about."

"Aye, sir!"

"The Tontakeen is targeting the array!" Lieutenant Cahnis warned.

"Move all ships into her line of fire!" the captain barked.

"Redirecting all combat vessels to shield the array from the Tontakeen's fire!" Lieutenant Commander Getty acknowledged.

"Five seconds."

Captain Navarro stared at the tactical display on the center overhead view screen, taking note of every ship as they all maneuvered into position to protect the Ghatazhak storage array.

"The Tontakeen is firing! Plasma and kinetics!"

Captain Navarro continued to watch the tactical display as the icon representing his ship slipped in front of the red line that had just sprouted from the icon representing the Tontakeen's firing path. The line connected with the Avendahl's icon just as the bridge shook lightly from the incoming fire. The Tontakeen was a massive ship, with powerful weapons, but the Avendahl was a capital ship, and she was even bigger.

"Maintain position," Captain Navarro ordered.

"Tontakeen has ceased fire," Lieutenant Cahnis reported. "She's pitching up... she's jumping, sir."

"Flight, launch two more fighter squadrons," Captain Navarro ordered. "I want that array protected."

"Aye, sir."

"The Tontakeen may just be turning around to attack from another angle," Commander Erbe warned.

"Perhaps," Captain Navarro agreed. "Flight, also launch cargo tugs. I want the rest of those Ghatazhak pods on board this ship as soon as possible."

"Aye, sir."

Captain Navarro looked at Commander Erbe. "How quickly can they revive those troops and get them combat ready?"

"Normally, two days," the commander answered. "However, they can be ready to fight in half that time. They just won't be at one hundred percent. After all, they have been in stasis for nearly a year now."

"As soon as we get those pods on board, start reviving those men," Captain Navarro ordered. "I suspect we are going to need them sooner than expected."

* * *

"The best broadcast studio for us to target is in the Mora district, on the southern edge of Cetia, near the shore," Gerard explained as they walked down the corridor of the complex. "It will take us nearly two hours to get there."

"If my calculations are correct, that will be cutting it pretty damned close," Jessica warned.

"Your calculations were correct. We checked."

"Nothing closer?"

"One, but it is also closer to a Jung security station. They would be on us in minutes, and the longer we're able to broadcast, the greater the odds that your people will receive the message," Gerard explained.

"How are we going to get there?" Jessica asked as they left the corridor and entered a large cavern containing several delivery trucks.

"In that," Gerard answered, pointing at one of the trucks.

"It's not very big," Jessica said. "Will it hold everyone?"

"This *is* everyone," Gerard answered.

Jessica looked around. Besides herself, Naralena, and Gerard, there were only six other men. "Nine people? That's it? What kind of a liberation army are you?"

"Eight, actually."

"What?"

"The vehicle only has room for eight people. Two in front and six in the back."

Jessica looked at the truck again. "You could fit twenty in the back of that."

"The Jung routinely scan delivery vehicles, checking the contents for various reasons. This vehicle is designed to fool the Jung scanners. However, that equipment takes up space. Therefore, only six people will fit in the back."

"Jesus," Jessica exclaimed. "When I suggested that we capture a broadcast studio, I was thinking of a force of a hundred, not eight."

"I could have one hundred men to attack with, if given more time. The Jung monitor communications very closely. It takes days, sometimes weeks to get messages out to all our operatives."

"Uh, Jessica?" Naralena asked.

Jessica turned to face her. Naralena pulled at her arm, separating her from Gerard and his men. "Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked under her breath.

"Of course I'm sure," Jessica answered, appearing somewhat surprised that Naralena had asked. "Why?"

"Why? Well, for starters, it seems a bit like a suicide mission... one with a very low probability of succeeding, I might add."

"Oh, we'll get the word out," Jessica stated confidently, "trust me."

"I'm sure you will. The question is, will anyone be listening?"

"There's no way to know," Jessica admitted, "but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't try."

"There's got to be a better way to warn the Aurora."

"There probably is, but there's no time. This is all we've got, and we have to go for it."

"What about me?" Naralena asked.

"Looks like you're going to have to stay here and watch it all on the vid," Jessica replied. She noticed Naralena's reaction. "You didn't really want to go, did you?" she asked.

"I mean, I'm pretty sure one of these guys would be willing to give up his seat..."

"No, that's alright," Naralena insisted. "I've been shot at enough for one lifetime, thanks." Naralena hung her head down. "First Jerome, now... I never should have come on this mission. I'm not cut out for it."

"You've done great," Jessica insisted.

"What am I going to do, though... if..."

"Hey, don't worry about me," Jessica interrupted. "This is what I'm trained for. It's what I do, and I'm damned good at it." Jessica winked. "I'll be back before you know it. Besides, these people will take care of you, no matter what happens." Jessica turned toward the others. "Right guys?"

The other men looked at her, confusion in their eyes.

"I'm pretty sure most of them don't speak English, Jess."

"Right." Jessica pulled her handgun out of her holster and handed it to Naralena. "Power, safety," she explained, showing the switches to Naralena. "If everything goes to shit, and you're about to be captured..."

"I know."

Jessica looked her in the eyes. "You got this?"

"I've got this," she replied, nodding her head.

"See ya soon," Jessica said, as she took two steps back and then turned and headed toward the truck to join the others.

* * *

Captain Navarro stood on the starboard catwalk, looking down into one of the Avendahl's cavernous bays. Below him were seven Ghatazhak deployment pods, their hatches open, the entrances guarded by the Avendahl's own Ghatazhak forces. Newly awakened soldiers emerged from

the large, rectangular pods, greeted by members of the ship's medical staff, eager to check their well-being and administer medications to speed their return to active status.

"How many?" Captain Navarro asked Commander Erbe as he approached.

"Six hundred. One pod was damaged during the attack, killing all the occupants."

"One hundred dead, and the war hasn't even begun."

"It began the moment those forces attacked property of the Takaran people and tried to take it as their own," Commander Erbe insisted. "It started when allegedly honorable men began talking of treason. It started when those men decided that they were no longer bound by the agreements of their forefathers."

"The Charter of Torrence was a mistake," Captain Navarro said. "My grandfather told me this more than two hundred years ago."

"You don't look a day over one fifty," the commander replied in deadpan fashion as he gazed out over the activities below.

Captain Navarro looked at his old friend. "Humor. A rare find among the Ghatazhak." Captain Navarro sighed. "You cannot ask men of great wealth and power to give up what they consider rightfully theirs, no matter how much it might benefit their people. All you can do is ignore them, and let them fade into obscurity in the face of a new order."

"An odd statement from a military man," the commander observed. "After all, our purpose is not only to defend, but also to convince others to acquiesce to our terms."

"My grandfather was not your typical military officer. He believed that orders had to be questioned by reasonable men, in order to test their worthiness to be carried out."

"Sounds like someone I know."

"I suspect that is why I have always admired the Ghatazhak," Captain Navarro said. "Your men question and analyze everything, down to the tiniest detail, before they act."

"Yet, they still obey orders."

"Yes, they do." Captain Navarro looked at the commander again. "Has no Ghatazhak ever questioned his superior officer?"

"Never."

"How is that possible?"

"Because we are always right, and the men under us know that to be true, because they have also analyzed the situation, the same as us."

"But truth is not always absolute."

"My men do not need to agree with my decision, nor do they need to like it. They only need to understand it. Understanding why you are being asked to do the things you do makes doing them all the easier."

"Yet, you never explain your decisions to any of your subordinates?"

"There is no need. They were all taught the same as me. They act the same. They think the same. There is an old saying. 'A Ghatazhak only differs from his brethren in three ways. His name, his rank, and his experiences.' That overall sameness is just as much a reason for our strength as any other part of our training. We think as one. We act as one. We are one."

"The question is, will your 'one' be enough to defeat theirs?"

Commander Erbe leaned forward on the railing. "I never thought I would see the day when Ghatazhak would fight Ghatazhak."

"The loyalty programming has always been a double-edged sword, my friend."

"Indeed." Commander Erbe took a breath. "Assuming they do not have the Ybaran Legions on their side, our intelligence estimates indicate we are closely matched... perhaps with the slightest advantage on our side."

"And if the Legions are on their side?"

"I suppose we shall see," the commander replied. "I know one thing, I would not want to live knowing that I killed my fellow Ghatazhak, while acting as the agent of a group of treasonous old fools."

"Do not take this the wrong way, my friend, but I am more concerned with the Crippin and the Astaire."

"May I offer some words of advice?"

"Need you ask permission?" Captain Navarro replied.

"Show no mercy, Captain. Let them fire the first shot, but make sure you fire the last. Fire everything you have when a target presents itself, as it will do so but a few times at best. They will test you, for they want to take you intact to ensure their own supremacy within the sector. Do not fool yourself... this war will be won or lost on the surface of Takara, not in space."

Captain Navarro took in a deep breath, letting it out in a long sigh that spoke clearly of the pressure he felt in that moment.

"I trust you have secured your family?" Commander Erbe inquired.

"Two days ago, when the opposition first contacted me," the captain replied. "They are in hiding on Corinair."

"That explains the attack on the array," the commander realized. "You demonstrated your intent when you whisked your loved ones to safety."

"They knew my intent before they contacted me," Captain Navarro insisted. "The gesture was nothing more than a formality."

* * *

The vehicle came to a stop again. Jessica waited, expecting to once again have to brace herself as the delivery truck in which they hid began rolling forward again, just as it had done countless times over the last thirty minutes as they wound their way through Kohara's capital city. She had been sitting in the cramped space, surrounded by five men, only one of which she knew by name, for going on two hours. It was dark, lit only by the indicator lights of the equipment that shielded them from detection by the Jung scanners located throughout the city. It was also poorly ventilated, a fact about which Gerard had neglected to warn her.

This time, however, the vehicle did not move again. Instead, there was a knock on the forward wall. A series of taps, patterns tapped out in pauses of variable lengths.

"We have arrived," Gerard whispered in the darkness. "They are asking how to know when it is time to act."

"Trust me, they'll know," Jessica insisted.

"Something a little more exact might help."

"Tell them that when they see bright blue-white flashes of light all around the city, and things start exploding... that will be their cue."

"Good enough." Gerard began tapping out a response.

"Got the time?" she said, nudging the guy next to her. The man looked at her, confused. She looked at Gerard.

"Twenty-one twelve," he told her as he continued to tap out instructions to the guys in front.

Jessica sat patiently. A minute later, Gerard finished delivering the instructions. "By your calculations, the attack should come within the hour."

Jessica leaned forward in order to keep her voice low. "So, just how much is the public buying into the whole 'the Earth is still infected' thing?"

"The Jung are very good at propaganda. They have been using it since they arrived decades ago. Like anything, some people believe it, some don't. Most of the so-called 'street polls' I've seen would indicate that most people do believe it, and they support the Jung's efforts to quarantine Earth. Then again, those polls are conducted by a Jung-controlled media, so..."

"Right."

"The blue-white flashes you spoke of," Gerard said, "then it's true what the Jung say about the people of Earth having invented a way to circumvent the quarantine?"

"Yes, but it wasn't invented to circumvent a quarantine. It was developed to give us an edge, a way to defend ourselves against the Jung."

"How does it work?"

"Beats the hell out of me," Jessica answered. "All I know is that the Aurora can get anywhere within fifteen light years in the blink of an eye."

"Incredible," Gerard whispered. "It took me nearly three years to get here."

"We made it back from the Pentaurus cluster in about a month, and that's over nine hundred light years away. Now we've even got comm-drones making that run in a matter of hours. Shuttles in a few days."

"And you have two warships with this capability?"

"Two Explorer-class and three Scout-class," Jessica explained. "Not to mention a few dozen interceptors,

shuttles, gunships, and so on. Oh, and our friends in the Pentaurus cluster even jumped an asteroid base all the way back to Sol."

Gerard shook his head. "So much has changed since I left. I doubt I would even recognize Earth again."

"You know, I've always wondered something," Jessica said. "After all these years here, how do you keep going? Why don't you just fade into Cetian society and live out your life?"

"Like Ellyus Barton?"

"Not exactly, but you know what I mean."

"I don't know, really," Gerard admitted. "I suppose it is what drives me... my mission, that is. I have a wife and children. They know who I am and what I do. I have friends, all of which are part of my world, my mission. In fact, it was because of my wife that the Cetian Liberation Army came to exist. She got tired of hearing her friends complain about the Jung and told them they should do something. She told me they wanted to start a movement. That's when I told her who I really was."

"That was a hell of a risk."

"Perhaps," Gerard admitted, "but had I not taken it, you would be in a Jung interrogation facility right now."

"More likely I'd be dead," Jessica insisted. "There's no way I can let myself be interrogated."

"You're lucky you don't have any Jung nanites in you," Gerard reminded her. "Otherwise, they would already know everything you have seen and heard."

Jessica leaned back against the inner wall of the truck. "That a fucking scary thought."

* * *

"I have not heard from my contact on Ybara," Major Bellen admitted. "I suspect that he is either detained, or... otherwise unable to send word. Very little is known about that world these days. It is believed that the Ybarans wish nothing to do with Takaran society. I have even heard rumors that they intend to abandon their world and move elsewhere... perhaps even out of the cluster altogether."

"One could not blame them," Casimir said as he moved across the room and around his desk. "The Ybarans have been marginalized by the nobles for centuries, then enslaved by my brother and made to commit countless atrocities in his name. I am surprised they have not turned on us long ago."

"They still might, if given proper motivation."

"Are you suggesting that we attempt to enlist those animals?" Casimir asked, surprised by the Major's suggestion.

"I doubt they would even speak with anyone from the house that still carries Caius's name. I am more concerned with the Crippin and the Astaire. If those ships are able to join the fight, and their captains side against us, they could very well turn the tide."

"Their jump drives are not yet operational," Casimir insisted.

"Are you certain of this?"

"As certain as possible."

"Even without jump drives, heavy cruisers are formidable weapons. As Captain Navarro said, in a local engagement, short FTL hops are nearly as effective as those executed using a jump drive. The effect is the same. One moment you are here, the next you are there."

"The key word is *nearly*," Casimir insisted.

"A very fine line on which to hold the future of Takara, my lord," the major pointed out. "If those ships *do* join the fight, it might be best if the Avendahl destroys them in short order."

"I was hoping to send those ships to Sol to serve the Alliance," Casimir explained.

"Which you will not be able to do if you are no longer in power... or worse."

"Rest assured, Major, that I have already made such recommendations to Captain Navarro."

"Have you considered sending the Ghatazhak to seize both ships while they are still in port?"

"Doing so would force the opposition to take immediate action," Casimir argued.

"Without the Crippin or the Astaire."

"Seizing the property of another house is a direct violation of the Charter of Torrence."

"And destroying them is not?"

"Not if they fire first," Casimir insisted. "If we are to protect Takara from herself, we must do so by rule of law, not by force or intimidation, no matter how righteous we believe ourselves to be. As long as we remain true to the Charter of Torrence, we cannot be charged in any court, and my claim to power remains legal."

"Laws are written by the victorious, my lord, not the righteous. Failure to do what is necessary, no matter how distasteful that action might be, may very well lead to your undoing, and that of Takara."

Casimir sighed as he finally took his seat. He looked up at Major Bellen. "I fought for decades to overthrow my brother and destroy the illegal empire he had created. I was forced to do the same *distasteful* things of which you speak, many of which still haunt me to this day. Once I looked into

the eyes of my firstborn, I knew I could never be that man again. That is why I gave power back to Parliament so quickly... to atone for the atrocities that I had committed."

"I understand, my lord," Major Bellen said, "but if you are unwilling to do what is needed, your house will fall, and the opposition will reinstate the empire using the jump drive technology that *you* gave them."

"Which is why I instructed Captain Navarro to destroy those very ships should they display ill intent."

Major Bellen hung his head, attempting unsuccessfully to hide his frustration. "My lord, you are making my job extremely difficult."

"I would gladly trade places with you, Major," Casimir replied.

"At least send Deliza and young Mister Hiller to safety, along with the Earth's data cores."

"I have tried," Casimir explained. "She refuses to go."

"You gave her a choice?"

"She gave me none."

"She is a child, my lord. Say the word, and my men shall forcibly take her to the Avendahl."

"If and when this house is about to fall."

"And you will leave as well, should this come to be?"

"I ran before," Casimir said. "I hid for years before I finally took action. I shall not run again."

"My lord," the major objected.

"We shall not speak of this further," Casimir insisted, raising his hand. "On to other matters. Have you secured the data cores?"

"The original cores from Earth are on their way to the Avendahl as we speak."

"And the copies?"

“Rigged for destruction, as requested.” Major Bellen handed a small device to Casimir. “Attach this to your chest. If your heart stops, the detonators will be triggered.”

“This is the same device that Caius used to guarantee the loyalty of the nobles, is it not?”

“Similar in design, yes. Eternal youth is a strong motivator, to be sure.”

“He may have been a twisted megalomaniac, but my brother was not stupid.”

“No, he was not.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Admiral Dumar entered the fleet combat control center in the Karuzara asteroid. The room had only been completed a week ago, and this would be its first official use. The room resembled the bridge of a Takaran frigate, with controllers around the perimeter, and a large holographic plotting table at the center. The ring of controllers was a bit lower than the deck behind it, which in turn was a bit lower than the central platform that contained the plotting table and the cluster of view screens and projectors above it. While the controllers worked their stations along the outer perimeter, supervisors paced behind them, each monitoring three or four controllers, and in turn reporting to the command officers on the central platform... in this case, Admiral Dumar.

"Admiral," Commander Bryant greeted from the central plotting table.

"Commander," the Admiral replied. "I trust all is ready?"

"All ships are in position outside the Tau Ceti system. KKV's are also in position and ready for launch. Porto Santo reports all jump ships are loaded and spun up on the tarmac, ready for departure."

"And our new communications system is working properly?"

"Average lag of twelve seconds, Admiral."

"A lifetime during battle," the admiral commented.

"It's the best we could do with the number of jump comm-drones at our disposal, sir."

"I suppose I should not be complaining about a twelve second comm-lag over a distance of nearly twelve light

years,” Dumar added. He looked down at the plotting table, counting the icons of various types. “I still wish we had more men to put on the surface.”

“We could always use more men, Admiral,” Commander Bryant agreed.

Dumar looked up at the clock on the wall. “We go on schedule,” he ordered.

“Yes, sir,” Mister Bryant replied, holding up his hand to signal his communications officer, who was listening to the conversation from only a meter away.

Commander Telles stood in the control room at Porto Santo space port, staring at the view screen showing the tarmac outside. Rows of combat jumpers, cargo jumpers, Falcons, and boxcars sat on the ground, their engines idling.

“Message from fleet command,” the communications officer reported. “Operation to commence on schedule.”

Telles looked up at the time display over the view screen.

“Two minutes,” Master Sergeant Jahal said as he stepped up next to his commander.

“We have seen much action together, Master Sergeant,” Commander Telles said.

“Indeed we have, sir.”

“I believe we have performed our duties admirably.”

“I would agree.” The master sergeant looked at the commander. “Is there a point, sir?”

“In all the time we have been together, have you known me to be wrong about anything?”

“Not once, commander.”

“Then you can understand my concern when I say that I am convinced that we are about to jump into the very fires of hell.”

"The hotter the better, sir," the master sergeant replied.

Commander Telles turned and looked at his master sergeant, one eyebrow raised, as he tried unsuccessfully to hold back a laugh. "The hotter the better? Seriously?"

"I'm sorry, were you trying to scare me, sir?"

"Not at all, Master Sergeant. Just stating my opinion."

"Better a dead hero," the master sergeant pronounced.

"...than a cowardly survivor," the commander finished.

"No one lives forever, sir. Especially a Ghatazhak."

"Commander?" the communications officer called.

Telles glanced up at the clock again. "Stand by to launch the first wave."

"One minute to launch," Ensign Wells announced.

Sergeant Poteet sat at his station in Scout Three's control compartment, monitoring the KKV status displays. "Hey, Keesh," he said to the sergeant next to him, "you ever wonder what happens if one of these things goes off course and hits something it's not supposed to?"

"Like what?"

"Like a planet, obviously."

"I don't know," Sergeant Ravi replied. "Not good for the planet, I'm sure."

"Yeah, but, would it destroy the planet, or just fuck it up real bad?"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters."

"Shit, Tweety, why are you always asking these kinds of questions at moments like this, huh?"

"When am I supposed to ask such questions?"

"Don't you think someone in command thinks about such things?"

“Thirty seconds!” Ensign Wells exclaimed, attempting to drown out the two sergeants.

“Nothing is going to hit a planet,” Captain Nash insisted over the comm-sets. “The targets are all several thousand kilometers from any of the planets, so relax.”

“Ten seconds,” Ensign Wells announced.

“All KKV’s are powering up their main propulsion,” Sergeant Poteet reported.

“KKV internal navigation systems are locked on target points,” Sergeant Ravi added.

“Five seconds,” Ensign Wells continued. “Three.....two.....one.....launch.”

“Launching KKV’s,” Sergeant Poteet replied.

Outside Scout Three, not more than a few hundred kilometers away, four converted Takaran comm-drones fired their main engines and began to accelerate rapidly. Seconds later, the four KKV’s were nothing more than four glowing, yellow balls, and seconds after that, they had vanished.

“KKV’s have reached transition velocity,” Sergeant Ravi reported. “Going FTL in three.....two.....one..... KKV’s have gone to FTL, sir. Estimate target impact in thirty seconds.”

“Stand by for combat jump one,” Captain Nash said.

“Jump one, plotted and ready,” Commander Eckert replied, as the two sergeants continued to debate the implications of an accidental KKV strike on a planet. The commander turned toward the captain to his left. “Are they always like this?”

“They’re a couple of twenty-something sergeants who have to push buttons to kill tens of thousands of men from a

light year away. It's how they deal with it, Skeech."

"I suppose you're right, sir," the commander admitted.
"Ten seconds to jump one."

"The ship is at general quarters," Ensign Souza reported from the Aurora's comm station.

"Weapons are charged and ready," Luis reported from the tactical station.

"Thirty seconds to first jump," Ensign Riley reported.

"Fifteen seconds to KKV strike," Luis added.

"Very well," Nathan said from his command chair.

"Twenty seconds."

"Porto Santo reports first wave has lifted off," Ensign Souza announced.

"Ten seconds."

Nathan continued to listen to the status reports from his bridge staff as the last few seconds to their jump into battle counted down. The attack was to be a choreographed series of jumps, maneuvers, and shots, all designed to take advantage of the element of surprise. By the time each ship learned of attacks on others, they themselves would already be under attack.

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

The jump flash translated through the Aurora's main view screen, momentarily bathing the bridge in blue-white, despite the filters built into the displays.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Contacts!" Mister Navashee reported. "Two Jung cruisers, designations charlie one and two. One at ten to port, four down, ten kilometers. Two at fifteen to port, fifteen down, two hundred kilometers."

"Targeting charlie one," Luis reported. "All forward tubes. Give me twelve to port and twelve down, Mister Chiles."

"Twelve to port and twelve down, aye," the helmsman answered.

"No battle platforms or battleships in the area," Mister Navashee added. "However, I do have debris fields at their previous locations."

"Forward tubes locked. Firing triplets, one through four," Luis reported.

Red-orange balls of plasma streaked across the main view screen in groups of three, disappearing in the distance at the center of the screen.

"Jump two ready," Mister Riley reported.

"Clear jump line to second target," Mister Chiles added.

"Debris analysis confirms, all KKV targets destroyed," Mister Navashee announced.

Nathan felt a sigh of relief wash over him. Had even one of the Jung battle platforms or battleships survived the initial KKV strike, the situation would have become far more dangerous. However, he had only fired on a single cruiser so far, and there were three more of them out there, not to mention eight frigates and any number of gunships and fighters that might be launched.

Small bright flashes of light slightly above and right of the main view screen's center caught Nathan's eye.

"Direct hits!" Luis announced.

"Jumping in three..."

Three more flashes of light, this time yellow-orange, were seen at the same location on the main view screen.

"Two..."

"Charlie one destroyed," Mister Navashee announced.

"One..."

“Forward tubes charged and ready,” Luis stated as the ship was about to jump to the next target in their attack sequence.

“Jumping.”

Again the jump flash washed over them.

“Jump complete,” Mister Riley reported.

“Locking forward tubes on target charlie two,” Luis announced. “Triple shots on all tubes... Firing!”

More red-orange balls of plasma streaked across the main view screen.

“Pitching down and starboard,” Mister Chiles reported.

The stars on the main view screen rolled to the left and began to slide up the screen as the ship maneuvered onto a new course for her next jump.

“I’ve got more contacts,” Mister Navashee reported, “Charlie three and four, right where they’re supposed to be.”

Nathan smiled. The attack had begun and was proceeding according to plan.

“How the hell did we end up as the commander’s personal flight crew?” Sergeant Torwell asked as he climbed into his seat in the center of the combat jump shuttle’s main compartment. “Oh yeah, I remember now. Someone had to go and show off with all kinds of fancy flying and quick thinking. Damn, I must be getting old. I can’t seem to remember who that was. Hey, L-T! Do you remember who that was?”

Lieutenant Kainan shook his head in dismay.

Sergeant Torwell looked at the two door gunners as they swung their weapons on their mounts, pulling them inside the door and raising them up out of the way. “Now, you boys

make sure your safeties are on and your cells are powered down before you stow those weapons.”

“I’m pretty sure they know how to use those things, Sarge,” Ensign Latfee said from the copilot’s seat.

“I’m just making sure,” the sergeant explained. “I don’t know these boys from shit.” Sergeant Torwell looked at the two gunners who had just joined their crew the day before. “Nothing personal, gentlemen. I’m sure you’re both fine lads, and crack shots.” The sergeant activated his seat, which then began to ascend, raising him so that his head was in the turret bubble overhead. “I just don’t want any accidental discharges in the cabin with my ass dangling from the ceiling.”

“Probably ruin your whole day,” the lieutenant commented.

“Okay, my head’s in the oven, L-T. Let’s get this thing into space before my brain is well done.”

“Two minutes until the second wave launches,” Latfee said.

“Jesus. Why don’t these missions ever start during our nighttime?” the sergeant wondered. “You know, when the sun *isn’t* a problem?” The sergeant pivoted his turret from side to side, altering his rotation speed to test his systems. He stopped and pointed to starboard, noticing Commander Telles and his men coming toward them. “Here come the VIPs.”

“What do you have against Commander Telles?” the lieutenant asked.

“Nothing,” the sergeant answered. “I’m sure he’s a great guy. Not too crazy about his desire to always be inserted into the middle of shit, but other than that...”

“One minute,” Latfee reported.

"Any word on the battle yet?" airman Davies asked from the port gunner's chair.

"What do you care, Davies?" the sergeant asked. "We're jumping in either way."

"Just curious."

"All I know is that all the KKV targets were destroyed, and the first wave will be jumping in anytime now," Ensign Latfee said.

Commander Telles jumped up into the shuttle, moving to the port side of the bench seat across the back of the cabin, to make room for Master Sergeant Jahal and two more Ghatazhak soldiers behind him. He tapped his comm-set to switch to the shuttle's comm-channel as he slid over. "Ready to go, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Kainan replied.

"Change in our arrival point," the commander said. "I want a high view of the deployment before we decide where to insert, so jump us into sector two four north, at about one thousand meters."

"Aye, sir," the lieutenant replied. He looked at his copilot. "You get that?"

"Sector two four north at one thousand meters," Ensign Latfee replied. "I got it." He looked at the mission clock on the center console just above the forward windshield. "Ten seconds to lift off."

"Close up boys," the lieutenant ordered.

The two gunners activated their respective controls, causing the large doors on either side of the shuttle to slide forward and close, the sealing mechanism pulling them in tightly against their seals.

"Green lights across the board," Ensign Latfee reported.

"Lifting off in three.....two.....one..." Lieutenant Kainan pushed the shuttle's four power levers forward. The engines

screamed to life and the shuttle rose quickly off the tarmac, rotating to port as it climbed into the sky. "Thrusting forward," he added as he pushed the main throttle forward. The shuttle's computerized flight control systems began to angle the shuttle's four thrust pods aft, causing the ship to slide forward, rapidly picking up speed. "Pitching up," the lieutenant announced as he pulled back on the control stick.

The combat jump shuttle began to accelerate even more rapidly as its nose came up, its engine pods swung further aft, and its thrust increased. Within seconds, the shuttle was racing toward orbit.

"Jump to orbit in, three..." Latfee counted.

"Velocity at one five zero zero," the lieutenant reported.

"Two..."

"On departure course and ascent angle."

"One..."

The shuttle's windows all became opaque.

"Jumping."

Although the shuttle's windows had turned opaque, a small amount of light translated into the cabin of the combat jump shuttle, providing them with instant positive feedback that a transition event had taken place. The windows immediately became clear again.

"Jump complete," Latfee announced. "Come new course... one three eight, sixteen up relative. Decelerate to five zero zero."

"One three eight, sixteen up. Decel to five zero zero," the lieutenant acknowledged.

"Jump series to Kohara in thirty seconds," Ensign Latfee announced.

Sergeant Torwell looked about outside. They were departing a high orbit above the Earth, and were surrounded by twenty other combat jumpers, as well as

several troop jumpers and ten boxcars. "We are bringing a whole lotta hurt to the Jung today, boys and girls," he commented.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

Nathan glanced at the threat board display in the lower right of main view screen, as it repainted with updated information after the Aurora's jump. The icon representing the second Jung cruiser they had attacked and just jumped away from blinked red several times, then faded away.

"New contacts," Mister Navashee announced. "Jung cruisers, charlie three and charlie four."

"Locking forward tubes on target charlie three," Luis reported.

"Target charlie two confirmed destroyed, Captain."

Nathan did not respond, instead just watching the status displays on the main view screen, and listening to his crew report their actions as the attack progressed.

"Forward tubes locked on target charlie three," Luis reported. "Firing triplets, tubes one through four."

More red-orange balls of plasma streaked across the main view screen, from both sides toward center.

"Adjusting course to intercept target charlie four."

"Multiple jump events in the vicinity of Kohara," Mister Navashee added. "Our first wave of ground forces has arrived."

"Acquiring new target," Luis said. "Locking forward tubes onto charlie four."

"Target charlie three has been hit, but she is not destroyed," Mister Navashee announced. "She must have started raising her shields as we fired, sir."

"Damage?" Nathan asked.

"Firing triplets, tubes one through four," Luis reported.

"Direct hits to main propulsion, direct hits midship. Power emissions... Captain! Charlie four is going to FTL!"

"Note her course and speed," Nathan ordered. "Helm, match her course but give us at least a few kilometers breathing room."

"Turning to parallel charlie four, five kilometer separation," Mister Chiles acknowledged.

"Mister Riley, prepare to jump one light minute along our new course," Nathan continued. "Lieutenant, ready aft tubes, in case we come out ahead of her."

"One light minute jump, aye," Mister Riley acknowledged.

"Ready on all tubes, fore and aft," Luis replied. "Ready on main plasma cannons as well."

"Jump plotted and ready," Mister Riley reported.

"On parallel course," Mister Chiles added.

"Jump."

"Jumping."

Nathan closed his eyes momentarily out of habit as the Aurora's jump flash washed over the interior of the bridge. "Where is she at, Mister Navashee?"

"Scanning," his sensor officer replied, his face buried in his console displays. "Got her! Astern, ten to port, four down, range thirty kilometers!"

"Helm, ten to starboard, four up," Nathan ordered without hesitation. "Tactical, triplets, stern tubes, fire at will!"

"Turning starboard ten and four up," Mister Chiles acknowledged as he initiated a quick course adjustment to bring their stern torpedo tubes onto the Jung cruiser behind them.

"Locking stern tubes on target," Luis reported. "Firing triplets, tubes five and..."

"Target is going FTL again!" Mister Navashee interrupted.

"Did she change course?"

"No sir," Mister Navashee replied.

"Snap jump, present course, ahead thirty light seconds," Nathan ordered.

"Snap jump, thirty light seconds, aye," Mister Riley replied.

"Kill mains and yaw twelve to port and pitch eight down, Mister Chiles," Nathan continued as the jump flash washed over the bridge.

"Mains to zero, yawing twelve to port, eight down angle," Mister Chiles replied as he brought the Aurora's nose back left and down relative to their direction of travel.

"Be ready on all forward tubes, Lieutenant."

"Just get them to stay in one place for five seconds," Luis replied.

"Contact! Charlie four! Five hundred kilometers, same course and speed as before!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Damn it!" Nathan exclaimed as he stood. "Lock on and fire!"

"Locking all forward tubes... Firing!"

"Charlie four is turning to starboard and pitching down relative," Mister Navashee reported.

"Helm, new course, twenty to starboard and fifteen down relative. Stand by snap jump, another thirty light seconds," Nathan instructed. He turned aft to face Luis at the tactical station directly behind his command chair, as his helmsman and navigator acknowledged their new orders. "Stern tubes again, triplets, wide spread," he ordered. "I'm going to try and put our stern tubes on her port side by jumping across her course."

"Clean miss! All torpedoes!" Mister Navashee reported.
"Target is going to FTL again."

"Snap jump, thirty light seconds! Kill your mains and pitch the nose up level relative!"

"Jumping," Mister Riley reported.

"Killing mains, nose up to level relative," Mister Chiles announced as the next jump flash washed over them.

"Charlie four, ten kilometers directly aft, four up relative," Mister Navashee reported with earnest.

"Adjusting pitch four down," his helmsman announced without prompting.

"Locking stern tubes on target. Firing triplets, wide spread, all tubes."

"Aft cameras!"

"Target is firing!" Mister Navashee reported. "Rail guns and missiles. Impact in ten seconds!"

"Escape jump!" Nathan ordered.

"Escape jump, aye!" Mister Riley replied as he initiated a preprogrammed jump of one light minute along their current course.

Nathan looked at the main view screen which still showed the view from the Aurora's aft cameras. Just as the jump flash lit up the screen, he thought he saw at least one yellow flash of light where the enemy cruiser should have been.

"Jump complete."

"Scanning for target," Mister Navashee announced.

"Helm, come about on a reciprocal heading," Nathan ordered. "Tactical, stand by all forward torpedoes."

"Coming about," Mister Chiles acknowledged.

"Message from command," Ensign Souza announced.
"Scout One reports twelve frigates, not eight. They've killed three so far."

"Find me that cruiser, Mister Navashee," Nathan urged.

"She's not there, Captain," his sensor officer replied. "I've got debris where she was last we fired. She must have gone to FTL right after we hit her."

"Then she's at least damaged," Nathan said. "She'll probably FTL for a minute or two to get clear, then assess her damage before returning to the fight."

"Should we jump ahead along her last heading, maybe pick her up again and finish her off?" Luis suggested.

"Her captain is quick on his FTLs," Nathan commented. "He's just going to keep hopping out of our line of fire, just like we would. We'll just wait and deal with him later, if and when he returns. Meanwhile, let's go help the Scouts with those extra frigates."

Jump flashes appeared all over the evening sky above Cetia. First came twenty small shuttles, appearing behind bright blue-white flashes of light, skimming in low over the city. The small shuttles were heavily armed and carried troops within their central compartments, as well as men aiming large energy weapons out the side doors at the ground below.

Behind them, only a few seconds later, came fast-moving fighters that looked like triangular flying wings, with engines mounted above and below. The fighters streaked overhead and launched missiles before pitching back up and disappearing behind more brilliant flashes of light.

Then came larger shuttles, without weapons, that also came in low, following the smaller, armed shuttles down in between the taller buildings.

The smaller shuttles quickly came to a hover at various points about the city, each dropping four men clad in flat-

black combat armor to the ground beneath them. As soon as the men were away, the shuttles began to climb, then disappeared into the night sky behind the same blue-white flashes of light that had punctuated their arrival.

Two men sitting in the front of a parked delivery truck watched as the flashes of light appeared in the skies above, and the first shuttles swooped down upon the city. Distant explosions could be heard and felt, followed by rising clouds of burning gases peeking out from the buildings deeper in the city.

The two men looked at each other, eyes wide. The driver pressed his accelerator pedal and pulled out into the street as the other man began to bang repeatedly against the rear wall of the cab. The vehicle accelerated down the street, turned the corner, and ran through the closed gate arm, ignoring the guard at the entrance waving for them to stop. The vehicle continued up the drive and across the square, causing pedestrians whose attentions were on the spectacle overhead, to jump out of the way at the last second to avoid being run down.

The delivery truck charged up the path, crashing through the glass doors that led into the broadcast studio.

Jessica bounced around in the back of the dimly lit delivery van, slamming into the man beside her as the truck came to a crashing halt.

“Go! Go! Go!” Gerard ordered.

The man directly across from her pulled a lever, causing the rear doors to spring open, and the inner door to drop down like a ramp. The man charged out, and Jessica

followed, turning on the power cell on her weapon and deactivating its safety as she jumped down out of the vehicle.

Amber needle-like bolts of energy slammed into the side of the truck as they jumped out, fired by the guards running up the pathway from the entrance. Jessica quickly returned fire, along with two other men, dropping the three charging guards with ease from their slightly elevated position. Jessica turned and ran around the side of the truck, as more amber bolts streaked past her from inside the lobby. She reached the front of the cab and fell in behind Gerard, who was returning fire. Seconds later, the firing stopped, and they charged forward, moving deeper into the building.

Two Jung frigates turned away and accelerated to get clear of the third frigate as it began to break apart. Two jump flashes appeared, revealing two Scout ships, aft and above the fleeing frigates, less than a kilometer away. The Scout ships immediately opened fire, each targeting one of the two frigates that were already returning fire. The Scout ships fired three bursts of plasma energy from their top-mounted torpedo tubes, repeating the pattern three times before pitching up and jumping away, just before the incoming fire reached them.

Balls of red-orange plasma splashed against the frigates' shields, one after the other. After four direct hits, one of the frigate's starboard aft shields collapsed, allowing the next volley of plasma energy to reach her hull. The impacts tore the frigate open, igniting secondary explosions deep within the frigate's stern section, breaking her in half. The second frigate, her shields still holding, tried to pitch up and avoid the forward section of the other frigate as it tumbled toward

them, but they were too late. The second frigate collided with the forward section of the first, causing her own shields to collapse. The nose of the first frigate slammed into the second frigate, tearing open her port side. Small bursts of fire spewed out from her open decks as electrical energy met combustible materials and oxygen, igniting fires that flashed and disappeared moments later as the oxygen that fed them was sucked out into the vacuum of space.

“Jump complete,” Commander Eckert reported as Scout Three came out of her jump. “Target is turning and climbing. Come thirteen degrees to port and pitch up two.”

“Foxtrot six has no shields on her port side, and has decks open to space!” Ensign Agari reported from the ship’s sensor station.

“I said two up, sir,” Commander Eckert said as he noticed their nose had already come up four degrees.

“Micro-jump,” Captain Nash said as he counter-thrusted to stop his course change. “Single kilometer in ten seconds.”

“Target is locking rail guns on us!” Ensign Agari reported.

“Pitching over,” the captain announced as he cut his forward thrust and pulled back hard on the ship’s attitude control stick. “Be ready on those forward tubes, Skeeched.”

“Jumping in three.....two...”

“Target is firing!” Ensign Agari reported.

“...One.....jumping.”

The Scout ship’s only windows, situated directly in front of Captain Nash and Commander Eckert turned opaque for two seconds, protecting their eyes from the intense light of the jump.

“Jump complete,”

"Stand by to fire," the captain said as he watched his flight displays. He glanced up at the window as their nose came over. The shrinking image of the damaged Jung frigate slid into the upper edge of their forward windows. The captain fired his attitude thrusters again, ending their pitch-over and putting their forward tubes onto the frigate that they were now coasting away from.

"Light 'em up," the captain ordered.

"Firing triplets," the XO replied.

Three bursts of three balls of plasma streaked from the outboard edges of their forward windows toward the center, converging on the damaged frigate just as it shrank down so small that they could barely distinguish it from the rest of the stars in the sky.

There was no mistaking the impact of their weapons. Small distant flashes of red-orange light obscured the tiny dot of light that was the damaged Jung frigate, followed immediately by yellow-white flashes indicating greater explosions.

"Nice," Captain Nash said under his breath as he began to pitch their nose back over to their direction of flight.

"Multiple secondaries," Ensign Agari reported. "Foxtrot six is destroyed!"

"How's our next scheduled target?" Captain Nash asked.

"No idea," Lieutenant Commander Nash admitted. "They're scrambling in all directions," he added as he studied his threat board. "I'm pretty sure everyone knows they're under attack, now."

"Wellsy?"

"Command is tasking Scouts One and Two to attack the two frigates over Sorenson, Cap," Ensign Wells answered.

"I've got the Aurora," Ensign Agari added. "She just jumped in over Kohara. I'm pretty sure she's making a run

at the three frigates coming around the planet's far side."

"That leaves us with the one still on patrol further out," Commander Eckert realized.

"They're far enough out that they may not yet realize what's going on," Captain Nash said. "We may get one last chance at a surprise attack here."

The combat jump shuttle shook violently as its windows became clear again.

"Jump complete," Ensign Latfee announced. "Altitude, one thousand meters and holding, speed at one five zero."

"Open the doors," Lieutenant Kainan ordered. "Gunnners stand ready."

The two gunners in the aft compartment activated their controls, causing the side doors of the shuttle to slide aft, disappearing into the bulkheads. The gunners clipped their harnesses to large rings built into the ceiling just inside the door, pulled their weapons down from above the open doorway, and then swung them outside until they locked into their firing positions hanging just outside the doors. The gunners sat down on the floor, with their feet stepping onto small ledges that had deployed from either side of the shuttle. The change in position relative to the ceiling caused the harnesses to become taught, allowing them to safely lean outward as needed to angle their weapons in all directions.

Commander Telles leaned into the open doorway, noticing the setting sun on the far horizon, as the last of the second wave of shuttles and boxcars jumped into the skies of Kohara. Above him were several boxcars, each carrying four Kalibri airships and two heavy airships. The under-hung airships were released one by one, dropping fifty meters

before their ducted rotors spun up to full power, allowing them to continue flight under their own power. As soon as the last airship was released, the boxcars jumped away, beginning their journey back to Porto Santo to reload and return with a new payload.

"Two four north, directly below," the lieutenant announced.

"I've got fast movers on the threat board," Ensign Latfee warned. "Our seven o'clock low. Forty seconds out."

"Any Falcons in the area?" Commander Telles wondered.

"Falcons, Falcons, Jumper One over sector two four north. Fast movers to our east, thirty seconds out. Looking for help."

"Jumper One, Falcon Leader," a voice replied over the comms. *"I've got two birds to your north, vectoring your way. They'll be there in twenty seconds. Suggest you take it to the deck and use the buildings for cover."*

"Falcon Leader, Jumper One. Copy that, taking it low. Make it fast," Ensign Latfee replied as the lieutenant pitched the shuttle downward toward the city below.

"Hang on, gentlemen," the pilot warned.

Jessica, Gerard, and his men stormed into the broadcast studio. Gerard fired his energy rifle into the ceiling, causing instant panic on the broadcast floor as camera operators and technical crew ran screaming for cover.

Jessica looked about the studio, recognizing the set as belonging to one of the many news broadcasts that Naralena had been watching for the last few days. "Perfect," she smiled. "You!" she hollered, pointing at a camera operator cringing in terror behind the base of his camera. "Keep that thing pointed on me, understand?"

The camera operator just looked at her blankly.

"Did you hear me?" she asked. "What the..."

"They don't understand English," Gerard said. He barked out a translation, and the camera operator immediately got back to his feet and swung his camera around at Jessica.

Gerard turned to one of his men, barking orders at them in Cetian as well. Two of them went to cover the entrances, and the other one headed for the control room. He looked at Jessica, who was still standing in the shadows. "Perhaps you should move over there?" he suggested, pointing at the set.

"Why?"

"The light is better."

"Okay," Jessica replied, moving toward the news desk in the center of the well-lit set. She looked at the newscaster sitting behind the desk. She was one of the few people in the room who did not run and hide when Gerard fired his first warning shots.

"Hi," Jessica said to her as she came around the desk to stand next to her. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna shoot you, as long as you just sit there and be quiet."

"I'm a newscaster," the woman replied. "I'm not paid to be quiet."

Jessica looked at Gerard. "Hey! I thought you said they didn't understand English?"

"As a general rule, yes," Gerard replied. "However, there are always exceptions to any rule."

"Who are you people?" the newscaster asked. "Are you CLA?"

Jessica looked at her funny for a moment. "Ah, Cetian Lib... They are, not me. I'm from Earth."

The woman recoiled slightly, in a state of semi-controlled terror.

“Relax,” Jessica told her. “All that shit the Jung have been feeding you about the plague is exactly that... shit. The bio-digital plague died out on Earth about nine hundred years ago.”

“But, the quarantine...”

“More shit. The Jung tried to conquer us just like they conquered you guys, only we managed to liberate ourselves, just like we’re about to liberate your world as well.”

“But, we’ve seen video,” the woman argued. “Your world is in ruin... the desolation, the poverty, the sickness and death...”

“All true, I’m afraid,” Jessica admitted. “But not because of the plague, because the Jung tried to bomb us back into the Stone Age... Twice!” Jessica got a puzzled look on her face. “Or was it three times? I lost count. Point is, they’re lying to you.”

“Why are you here?” the woman asked. “Are you trying to make all of Kohara believe you as well, at gun point?”

“Actually, I could care less what you people believe. I’m just here to get a message out using your emergency transmitter.”

“What kind of message?” the woman asked.

“The usual stuff,” Jessica replied. “Hi, Mom, having a great time. Wish you were here. That kind of...”

Jessica interrupted herself as she noticed guards moving down a corridor on one of the monitors on the wall. “Movement on the monitors!” she yelled at Gerard.

Gerard turned and saw the monitor as well. He barked a warning to his men, just in time for them to get into better position and open fire on the charging security forces.

Jessica watched on the monitor as weapons fire flew back and forth. The engagement only lasted a few seconds.

“Better make this quick,” Gerard said. “Jung have got to be on their way already.”

“Just tell me when to start talking,” Jessica replied.

“Start already!” Gerard instructed.

“Is that thing on?” she asked.

“The green light on top means it’s on,” the newscaster explained.

“Oh, thanks,” Jessica replied.

Jessica chuckled. “Funny how many things you find that are the same everywhere.”

The newscaster looked at her, unsure of her meaning. “I having a feeling I should interview you.”

“We’re ready!” Gerard reminded her.

“Maybe another time,” Jessica told the newscaster, just as the green light on top of the camera lit up.

Jessica turned and looked at the camera. “This is Lieutenant Commander Jessica Nash of the Alliance ship Aurora. I’m trying to get a warning to the Alliance. The Jung have two battleships hidden behind a small moon called Itimor, orbiting a gas giant called Tandrul. It’s the third gas giant in the system. Some of their comm-drones can go one hundred times light, so they already know about the liberation of Sol, and everything else. If you can hear my voice, get word to the Aurora. An ambush will be coming from a moon orbiting the third gas giant. Two more battleships are hiding, waiting to attack...”

Jessica stopped mid-sentence, noticing that Gerard had grabbed his weapon and was leaving the control room. “What’s going on?” she asked as the green light on top of the camera shut off.

“The Jung have arrived.”

“What about the message?”

"I have set it to repeat. We must hold them off for as long as possible."

"They'll just take out the transmitter," Jessica said as she followed Gerard out the door and into the corridor.

"They will, as soon as they realize what we're doing. For now, we fight while we can."

"How long do we have?"

"It depends."

"On what?" Jessica wondered.

"On how long it takes the Jung to kill us." Gerard replied.

"Great," Jessica said as she flipped the safety off on her energy rifle.

"Foxtrot ten destroyed," Mister Navashee announced in rather routine fashion.

"Helm, new course," Nathan began, "turn toward foxtrot..."

"New contact!" Mister Navashee interrupted. "Charlie four is back! Two kilometers off our starboard side! She's firing! Guns and missiles! Ten seconds to..."

"Snap jump!" Nathan ordered. "Five hundred meters! Helm! Kill the mains and kick our tail out twenty to starboard!"

"Jumping five hundred!" Mister Riley replied as the jump flash washed over them.

"Kicking out the tail, bringing tubes to bear."

"Snap shot, triplets out the stern tubes, Fire when ready!" Nathan ordered. "Standby on another half-kilometer jump!"

"Snap shot, stern tubes, triplets, firing..." Luis paused for a moment, waiting for their tubes to line up with the Jung

cruiser that was now five hundred meters behind them and to starboard.

"She's bringing her guns around again, and her missiles are turning to track," Mister Navashee warned.

"...now!" Luis announced. "Torpedoes away!"

"Snap jump five hundred meters!" Nathan ordered.

"Jumping."

"Helm, come ninety to starboard and forty-five down relative, quick as you can."

"Ninety to starboard, forty-five down, aye," Mister Chiles replied.

"Be ready on a third snap jump, same as before," Nathan told his navigator.

"Standing by to snap jump, five hundred," Mister Riley acknowledged.

"Port tube missed," Mister Navashee reported. "Starboard tube hit. Her ventral shields are weak."

"How weak?" Nathan wondered.

"Two or three more hits should bring them down."

"Turn complete," Mister Chiles announced.

"No time," Nathan commented. "Lieutenant, charge the main cannons. Full power, single shots."

"Charging main cannons to full power, single shots," Luis acknowledged.

"Snap jump us another five hundred meters, Mister Riley."

"Snap jump, five hundred," the navigator replied as the jump flash spilled out across the hull on the main view screen, then filled the bridge momentarily. "Jump complete."

"Forward tubes to bear, Mister Chiles," Nathan urged. "I want a clean shot at her belly."

"I'm with you, sir," Mister Chiles replied as he manipulated the Aurora's helm controls to rapidly bring their

nose up on the target.

"If she goes to FTL again..." Luis began.

"I don't think she can, sir," Mister Navashee commented.

"Almost there," the helmsman said.

"Target is rolling," Mister Navashee warned. "She's trying to protect her weak side."

"Three seconds," Mister Chiles reported. "Two..... one....."

"Firing!" Luis announced.

Four massive red-orange balls of plasma energy streaked across their main view screen, from the edges toward center, disappearing a split second later. Just as soon as they disappeared, four flashes of yellow-white light appeared in the distance at the center of the Aurora's screen.

"Direct hits!" Mister Navashee reported with excitement.

"Full mag," Nathan ordered.

The view screen changed a moment later. It was now filled with the image of the fourth Jung cruiser as secondary explosions ripped it apart, sending debris both large and small in all directions.

"Mister Navashee, where are foxtrots eleven and twelve?" Nathan asked.

"The Scout ships are already on them, sir."

"Very well. Helm, take us into orbit over Kohara. Let's see what we can do to help out our troops on the ground."

"I understand how you got the name 'Hotshot', but how did I get stuck with 'Stretch?'" Loki asked from the back seat of the interceptor.

"You're the tallest guy in the whole damned unit, Loki," Josh exclaimed.

"What does 'Stretch' even mean?"

"It's an old Earth term," Josh explained. "It means 'tall guy'. You see it all the time in old vids and stuff."

"Ten seconds to intercept," a voice called over the comms. *"Four, you take the two to the north, we'll take the two to the south."*

"Four copies," Loki answered. "You get that, Hotshot?"

"Sure thing, Stretch." Josh smiled as he altered their course slightly starboard to intercept their assigned targets.

"Painting targets now," Loki announced. "Steady while I deploy."

"You got it, Stretch."

"Please stop calling me that."

"Might as well get used to it, Stretch."

"Opening weapons bay doors," Loki reported. "Launching missiles."

Josh glanced up over his forward console as their two missiles streaked away on invisible jets of thrust, their tails glowing white hot as they disappeared in the distance.

"Ten seconds to missile impacts," Loki reported. "Target two is maneuvering. He's dropping countermeasures and climbing right. Target one is down!"

"Turning onto target two," Josh reported as he rolled slightly to starboard and pulled their nose up a bit, adding in a bit more power on his main engines. "Where's that second missile?" Josh wondered.

"Tagged a countermeasure," Loki replied. "Locking another missile on target."

"Save 'em," Josh insisted. "We'll be guns in a few seconds at this speed. Besides, the night is young. We might need those missiles later."

"Switching to gun turret," Loki said. "Pull high and force him to dive and give me a better angle."

"How do you know he's going to dive?" Josh wondered.

"He doesn't know we've got a nose turret, Josh," Loki explained. "He thinks you're trying to engage him in a straight-out dogfight. He'll roll over and dive. He'll think he can turn tighter than us because of our lifting body design."

"He's right, but so are you," Josh said as he pitched the nose up a bit more.

"Not too much," Loki warned, "or he won't buy it."

"Or he'll think we're idiots and can't fly an intercept heading."

Josh looked out over his console again, spotting the three glowing thrust ports of his opponent's engines. "I've got visual."

"Come on, fucker, dive," Loki mumbled.

"Hey, give me wing cannons."

"What?"

"Just give them to me."

"Alright."

"Watch this." Josh opened up with the Falcon's wing-mounted cannons, sending a steady barrage of red bolts of energy streaming forward. He added a touch of power, then stomped on his rudder pedals—first left, then right, then left again—repeating the process, while he continued firing, the streams of energy slicing back and forth laterally across the sky. The Jung fighter ahead of them twisted about as he tried to avoid the streams of energy as they swept the sky, finally rolling over and nosing down to escape the deadly streams of plasma.

"He's all yours, Stretch!" Josh declared.

"Stop calling me that!" Loki insisted as he opened fire with their nose turret. The icon on his weapons tracking display blinked several times and then disappeared. "Target

two is down,” Loki announced. “Come hard left to rejoin Falcon Three.”

“You got it, Stretch,” Josh replied with a grin.

Jessica and Gerard ran down the corridor toward the front entrance to the broadcast studios, the sound of energy weapons fire reverberating through the hallways from the front lobby. As they turned the last corner to the main hallway, red bolts of energy flew past their heads, glancing off the side walls and slamming into the wall at the end of the hallway, blowing it apart. Jessica immediately moved to the side of the corridor to stay out of the incoming line of fire, Gerard doing the same against the opposite wall.

As they neared the lobby, Gerard yelled something to his men in Cetian. The rate of fire from his men increased, and he darted into the lobby to his right, taking cover behind a long counter. Jessica followed suit, doing the same to the left. She ducked down behind the counter, moving just beyond one of Gerard’s men as he continued to fire over the top of the counter. He was obviously well-trained, being careful to keep his head down and firing in deliberate fashion rather than just spraying the area with gunfire.

Jessica moved to the end of the counter, paused, then stuck her head out for a brief moment, taking a quick survey of the Jung positions. *One behind the planter. One at the edge of the window, taking cover behind the wall. Two more further down the sloped walkway, using the curvature at the top of the walkway to their advantage as cover.*

Jessica ducked back behind the counter and looked over at Gerard at the next counter. “Hey!” she half-shouted, just enough to be heard over the exchange of weapons fire. “On

my signal, everyone stop firing until I tell you to start again.”

Gerard nodded his understanding, passing the word to his men in Cetian.

Jessica turned her back to the open end of the counter, lowering herself into a squatting position, her rifle at the ready. She looked at Gerard and made a slashing motion across her neck. Gerard and his men ceased firing.

A few more rounds of Jung energy weapons fire slammed into the front of the counter and the wall behind it, sending more bits of concrete and stone raining down upon them, but after a few seconds, the firing stopped.

Jessica held her hand up, gesturing for them to remain still and not fire. She waited a few more seconds, listening for any unusual sounds. Then she heard the sound of broken glass crunching beneath someone’s boot.

Jessica rolled backwards, rolling on her back and over, until she was again in a squatting position, only this time she was a good two meters beyond the end of the counter, her weapon raised. Directly in front of her was the Jung soldier who had been hiding behind the wall at the edge of the massive shattered windows. He had been trying to sneak forward and surprise the men behind the counter, and his eyes went wide at the sight of Jessica’s rifle barrel pointed at his face.

Jessica squeezed off a single burst of energy, striking the man directly in the face, sending him tumbling backwards. Directly behind him, and equally surprised, was the soldier who had been using the large planter for cover. He too had exposed himself in an attempt to move forward on their position. Jessica took him down with two more shots, the first one striking his chest armor, and the second one his right eye.

She rolled to her left as the other two soldiers further down the path opened fire. Two full rolls got her to cover, and she scrambled to her feet and ran forward to the wall. She leaned out and caught one of the two men as he popped up to fire, hitting him in the neck with an energy blast. She continued to lay down fire as Gerard moved out to the right, made his way to the window, and picked off the last man from a wide angle.

"Clear left!" Jessica yelled.

"Clear right!" Gerard answered.

"Only four?" Jessica wondered.

"The Jung have quick response squads located all over the city," Gerard explained. "More will arrive shortly, trust me."

"How long do we have?" Jessica asked as she moved back toward the central hallway.

"Five minutes at the most."

"We need to get the hell out of here," Jessica said.

"If we leave now, they will simply turn off your message. The longer we hold this position, the better the chances are that your message will be received."

"Fuck," Jessica exclaimed. "Fine, but we'd better make sure all other entrances are sealed off. These counters are reinforced, so they're as good a firing position as any. We need to clear cover from the immediate area outside, so that they have no choice but to come up that ramp and right into our field of fire."

"Once they realize our defensive abilities, they will simply cut the transmission and most likely level the building. They will no doubt blame it on the invading forces."

"No doubt," Jessica said as she stepped through the broken out window to go outside and prep the immediate

area as planned.

The combat jump shuttle raced between the buildings, staying as close to them as possible to stay out of the line of firing from the Jung fighters diving on them from above. Sergeant Torwell kept his gun turret to their starboard side, aimed high along the roof line above, firing briefly as openings became available when they passed over intersections.

"We can't do this forever, L-T!" Ensign Latfee insisted. "Sooner or later, they're going to come in low behind us..."

"Then we'll duck down another street!" the lieutenant insisted.

An explosion lit up the sky for a moment.

"Jumper One, Falcon Leader. Skies in the immediate area are clear."

"Fuck yeah!" the lieutenant exclaimed.

"Falcon Leader, Jumper One. Thanks."

"Take us back up to one thousand meters and come ninety to port," Commander Telles called from the back of the shuttle. "I need to get a good look at the downtown engagement area before we set down."

"You got it," the lieutenant answered.

The combat jump shuttle rose quickly above the buildings, climbing back up to its original altitude.

"Telles, Mobile Two."

"Mobile Two, go for Telles."

"Telles, Mobile Two. Robinson. SIGINT is picking up something you need to see, Commander. An over-the-air broadcast."

"Pipe it into our helmet displays," Telles ordered.

"Yes, sir. Sending it now."

Commander Telles and Master Sergeant Jahal watched the inside of their display screens as the broadcast was transmitted to their helmet displays. On the inside of their visors, they saw an image of a woman with dark hair and a familiar face, but the image quality was poor, and the sound broken with a lot of background static.

"This isant Commander of the ship I'm trying toing to the The Jung have two ba.....ips hi....."

"Isn't that..." Master Sergeant Jahal began.

"I believe so," the commander agreed, interrupting his friend. "Mobile Two, Telles. Transmission is garbled on our end. Are you getting a clear read?"

"Negative," Lieutenant Robinson replied over the comms. "We think it's Lieutenant Commander Nash, sir. Our best guess is that she's trying to warn us that the Jung have more battleships hidden in the vicinity of the third gas giant in the system. I think she's trying to warn us of an ambush."

"Do you have contact with the Aurora?"

"Negative, sir. Jung fighters already shot down half the comm-sats we deployed with the second wave, and the Aurora is over the horizon from us. We were hoping that you were in a position to relay."

"Falcons, Falcons," Commander Telles called. "This is Telles with priority request."

"Telles, Falcon Four. Go with request," Loki's voice replied over the comms.

"Sheehan, Telles," the commander began, recognizing Loki's voice. "Urgent message relay to Aurora Actual. High probability of two or more battleships hidden in the vicinity of the third gas giant. Suspect ambush. Do you copy?"

"Yes, sir. Possible ambush. Two or more battleships, third gas giant. We're pitching up to jump to orbit now," Loki

promised. After a brief pause, he spoke again. *"Commander, they're going to ask where the intel came from."*

"Tell them it came from Nash."

"Yes, sir. Falcon Four, out."

"I was sure she was dead by now," Master Sergeant Jahal admitted.

"So was I," the commander agreed. "Mobile Two, Telles. Did you get a fix on the location of that transmission?"

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant replied over the comms. *"Transmitting source coordinates to you now."*

"Send them to CJ One as well," The commander instructed.

"Yes, sir."

"Lieutenant," Telles called to his pilot. "Get us to those coordinates as quickly as possible."

"On our way, sir," the pilot replied.

"Entering low orbit over Kohara," Mister Riley reported.

"I've got waves of Jung fighters heading up from the surface," Luis reported from the Aurora's tactical station. "Three waves, total of eighty-four fighters."

"Threat level?" Nathan asked, rotating his chair aft to face his tactical officer.

"If they're the standard Jung fighters we've seen in the past, the threat level is low," Luis replied. "However..."

"Hold them off as best you can, Lieutenant," Nathan ordered. "Once the third wave is down, we should start getting some of the Falcons flying ground support sent up to us."

"Aye, sir. Targeting the incoming fighters with our laser turrets and mini-rail guns."

"If they become a problem, we can always jump out until those Falcons can join us."

"Jump event," Mister Navashee reported. "Two hundred kilometers astern, just popped into orbit. It's a Falcon."

"You see," Nathan said, "we've got one already."

"Captain," Ensign Souza called from the comm station. "Falcon Four is asking for Aurora Actual."

"Patch them through," Nathan ordered. He looked at Luis. "Which one is Four?"

"Josh and Loki," Luis replied.

"*Aurora Actual, Falcon Four!*" Loki called urgently over the comms.

"Falcon Four, Aurora Actual," Nathan replied calmly. "Go ahead, Ensign Sheehan."

"Relay from Telles. Jung have two or more battleships hidden in the vicinity of the third gas giant. Probably ambush."

Nathan felt his calm slip away. "Confidence?" he asked.

"The message came from Lieutenant Commander Nash, sir!"

"She's alive?"

"Apparently, sir!"

Nathan felt a wave of both panic and relief wash over him at the same time. "Helm, take us into a higher orbit," he ordered as he rotated forward again. "I want room to maneuver."

"Climbing to higher orbit, aye," Mister Chiles acknowledged.

"Mister Navashee..." Nathan started.

"...I've got nothing in the vicinity of the third gas giant," Mister Navashee assured him.

"Scan the other two as well, just in case they got it wrong," Nathan ordered. "Hell, scan them all. Find those

damned battleships.”

“Aye, sir,” Mister Navashee replied.

Nathan tapped his comm-set. “Falcon Four, Aurora Actual. Return to Telles and let him know we got the message. Then tell him to pick up Nash and her team and get them the hell out of there. If we heard them, then so did the Jung.”

“Pretty sure he’s on his way to her now, sir,” Loki assured him. “Mobile Two was passing coordinates to them as we left.”

“Great. Then give him some cover, he’s going to need it.”

“We’re on it. Falcon Four, out.”

“Those fighters are still coming,” Luis warned. “The first wave is two minutes out.”

“Have combat take over the perimeter defenses,” Nathan ordered. “I have a feeling you’re going to have your hands full handling two battleships.”

“Or more,” Luis added.

“Don’t say that,” Nathan replied. “Comms, contact all Scout ships and warn them as well.”

“That’s assuming they allow themselves to become targets,” Luis commented. “They’ve already seen us take out their platforms and other battleships. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out how we did that.”

“Contacts!” Mister Navashee reported urgently. “Jung battleships! Two of them just came out of FTL! One directly ahead, fifty kilometers, same orbital altitude! Second one, directly above us!”

“Designating targets bravo five and six,” Luis said. “Locking all forward tubes on bravo five, directly ahead. Locking plasma cannon and quads on bravo six above.”

“They’re firing!” Mister Navashee added.

"Which one?"

"Both of them, Captain! Guns and missiles. Ten seconds!"

"Point defenses!" Nathan barked.

"On it!" Luis replied. "Firing forward tubes!"

"Escape jump!"

"Our jump line is *not* clear," Mister Riley warned.

"Helm! New course, five to starboard! Quick as you can!"

"Five seconds!" Mister Navashee updated.

"Firing point defenses!" Luis added.

"Bravo six is matching our turn!" Mister Navashee announced.

"Clear line in three....."

The bridge shook as rail gun fire slammed into the Aurora's hull, then the entire compartment felt like it lurched downward, causing Nathan to feel like he was about to fly up out of his seat. The sensation repeated two more times within half as many seconds.

"...Two..."

"Direct hits topside!" Luis reported.

"...One..."

"Damage control reports hull breach topside!" Ensign Souza announced.

"Jumping!"

"Port recovery elevator is gone!" Ensign Souza added as the Aurora's jump flash washed over her bridge.

"They just missed our plasma cannon," Luis added.

"Jump complete!" Mister Riley reported.

"Where are we?" Nathan asked.

"One light minute out from Kohara," Mister Riley replied.

"Contact!" Mister Navashee announced. "Bravo six, just came out of FTL, still above us, slightly behind now! They're firing again!"

"Escape jump! Another minute forward!" Nathan ordered.

"Jumping!" Mister Riley acknowledged as the jump flash again washed over the bridge.

"Damn," Nathan exclaimed, "how did..."

"Contact! Bravo six is still with us! Above and even further behind than before! Firing again!"

"Escape jump!" Nathan ordered again.

"Jumping."

"Give me three of them in a row," Nathan added as the jump flash washed over them.

"Aye, sir," Mister Riley answered.

"Helm, as soon as we come out of the third jump, turn us two to port as quick as you can."

"Two to port, aye!" Mister Chiles acknowledged as the next jump flash washed over them.

"After the turn, give me a five-light-minute jump." Nathan ordered.

"Yes, sir," Mister Riley replied. "Executing third jump, now."

"Start your turn," Nathan ordered as the third jump flash washed over them.

"Turning five to port!"

"Plotting five-light-minute jump," Mister Riley added.

"Where are they, Mister Navashee?"

"Scanning now."

"Turn complete."

"Jump plotted and ready."

"Execute your jump," Nathan ordered.

"Jumping."

"New turn, five more to port. Hard as you can, Mister Chiles," Nathan ordered as the jump completed.

"Turning another five to port, hard," Mister Chiles replied.

"Next jump, ten light minutes."

"Aye, sir,"

"Any sign of them, Mister Navashee?" Nathan asked.

"No, sir."

"How *did* they know?" Luis wondered.

"They must have been watching the battle," Nathan said. "They figured out our standard escape jump is one light minute in distance. They just did the same, but with their FTL drive instead."

"Isn't the jump drive faster?" Luis wondered.

"Over longer distances, sure. But a light minute? Not so much."

"Turn complete," Mister Chiles reported from the helm.

"Ten light minute jump, plotted and ready," Mister Riley added.

"Execute your jump," Nathan ordered.

"Those battleships carry a lot of troops, as well as the shuttles to deploy them," Luis warned as the jump flash washed over them. "Not to mention plenty of fighters to provide cover."

"I know," Nathan replied. "That's why we have to turn around and go back and try to take them out."

"Maybe we should warn Telles," Ensign Souza suggested.

"Telles knew the implications before he even sent the message," Nathan replied.

"How are we going to take on two battleships?" Luis wondered. "They're just going to suck in close to the planet to keep us from launching KKV's against them."

"I know," Nathan replied.

"Jung column detected on road four four seven, crossing road five twenty-three," Ensign Latfee reported. "Looks

they're headed for the same coordinates as we are, Commander."

Commander Telles leaned out of the side door of the combat jump shuttle as it sped along between the buildings. His helmet sensors now outside the shuttle, the inside of his visor displayed numerous ground targets on a street three blocks to their left and a few kilometers ahead of them. "Anyone else in the area?" he asked as he looked up and scanned the skies, hoping for friendly icons to appear on his visor.

"Negative, sir," Ensign Latfee replied. "All the Falcons have been re-tasked to try and keep the fighters from those battleships from coming down and ruining our evening."

"Ascend and accelerate. Get ahead of them," Commander Telles ordered. "Then make a one eighty and take the column head on."

"Yes, sir," Ensign Latfee replied, looking over at the lieutenant on the flight controls.

"Why not just shoot at them from behind?" Sergeant Torwell wondered.

"Take out a few vehicles in front and you can stop the whole convoy," the lieutenant explained as he added lift and began to climb up above the buildings. Energy bolts began to streak upward from the roof tops, lashing out at the shuttle as it rose above the skyline.

"What the hell?" Sergeant Torwell exclaimed.

"Those aren't Jung," Corporal Davies commented as an energy bolt passed under his feet.

"Are those civilians shooting at us?" Ensign Latfee wondered.

"If they're not Ghatazhak, and they're carrying guns, they are targets," Commander Telles reminded them. "They

shoot at you, you shoot back... hopefully with greater precision than your opponent.”

“Yes, sir,” Corporal Davies replied as he opened fire on the rooftops below. Within seconds, the fire from below had ceased.

Telles watched his visor, his head pointed directly to port, as the shuttle pulled ahead of the convoy. His head continued to track aft until the convoy was well behind them. “Come about to port, Lieutenant, and bring it down to the deck three streets over.”

“Coming left,” the lieutenant replied. “All guns forward, boys.”

“Door gunners, you might want to pull your guns in and stay inside for this pass,” Ensign Latfee warned. “Those side guns will warm your heads up a bit.”

The shuttle continued a hard left turn, descending quickly as it came out of the turn pointed directly down road four four seven.

Lieutenant Kainan brought the shuttle down to only a few meters off the ground and continued racing toward the onrushing Jung convoy. “Got ‘em, dead ahead.”

Sergeant Torwell looked at his targeting display and adjusted his turret to put the aiming circle on the lead vehicle. A second later, the shuttle’s main side guns began to fire repeatedly, and the sergeant joined in, holding his trigger down to fire his double-barreled plasma weapon continuously.

The bolts of plasma energy sliced through the first few vehicles, causing them to explode and careen out of control. The first five vehicles collided, jamming up the roadway. They continued to fire as they passed overhead, the shuttle’s side guns tracking downward until the target was aft of the side guns’ field of fire. The shuttle pulled up

sharply and began to climb, turning to the right as soon as they cleared the tops of the buildings.

"Starboard gunner, hit them as we come around," the pilot ordered.

The starboard gunner pulled his weapon down and swung it outward, locking it into its firing position just in time to swing his barrel downward and open fire on the convoy as they passed again. At the same time, Sergeant Torwell opened fire with the topside turret as well.

"That should slow them down a bit!" Sergeant Torwell exclaimed.

"Two minutes to target coordinates," Ensign Latfee reported.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported as the jump flash faded away.

"Bravo five, four kilometers. Five port, three down," Mister Navashee reported.

"Bringing tubes to bear," the helmsman added.

"Locking all forward torpedoes and main plasma cannons on target," Luis followed.

"Bravo six, ten kilometers, forty-two to starboard and eighteen down. Five is bringing her guns and launchers onto us."

"Firing all forward tubes," Luis announced. "Firing main plasma cannons."

The Aurora's bridge flashed repeatedly with tinges of red-orange as sixteen plasma shots left the Aurora on their way to the Jung battleship in low Earth orbit directly ahead of them.

"Bravo five is firing,"

"All weapons away!"

"Turning to next jump path," Mister Chiles announced.

"Jumping in five seconds," Mister Riley added.

"Five's missiles will hit us in seven seconds."

"Three....."

"Bravo six is firing," Mister Navashee added.

"Two....."

"Rail guns only."

"One....."

"She's sweeping the area," Mister Navashee continued.

"Jumping!" Mister Riley announced as the jump flash washed over them.

The Aurora's bridge shook as rail gun rounds slammed into her outer hull.

"We jumped through their rail gun fire," Mister Navashee explained as the bridge continued to shake.

"More like *into* it," Nathan mumbled.

"Three kilometers, dead ahead!" Mister Navashee added.

"Firing all forward weapons!" Luis announced.

The bridge lit up again.

"Pitching up!" Mister Chiles said as he initiated a climb to get a clear jump line.

"Five seconds to jump!"

"Firing quads!" Luis added.

"Three..."

"Six is bringing her aft topside missile battery around!" Mister Navashee warned.

"Two..."

"I've got it!" Luis replied.

"One..."

"Six is firing..."

"So am I..."

"Jumping..."

"Hell yeah!" Luis exclaimed as the jump flash washed over them again. "Tagged those missiles as soon as they cleared her shields!"

"Coming about," Mister Chiles reported.

"How many shuttles did you count," Nathan asked his sensor operator.

"At least two dozen on their way down," Mister Navashee replied. "Twice as many fighters as well."

"Comms, relay that info to command," Nathan ordered. "How many Falcons are left?"

"Last count was twelve," Luis replied.

"Those odds suck."

"Falcons are great at picking off Jung fighters," Luis pointed out.

"They're going to have to be. I'm sure there are a lot more fighters on those ships." He turned to Mister Navashee. "Did those shots have any effect on their shields?"

"Yes, but only about a five percent drop, even with the main cannons."

"I could fire triplets with the main cannons," Luis suggested.

"And risk overheating them again?" Nathan replied.

"What about alternating them? Triplets on the outboard cannons the first time, inboard the second."

"Worth a try, I suppose." Nathan looked at Mister Navashee again. "What do you think that would get us?"

"Twenty percent drop per pass, maybe?"

"Five passes and we'd have a shot," Luis said.

"Unless of course they just FTL it away long enough for their shields to regenerate. How long does that take?"

"Not long enough," Mister Navashee replied.

“No, to pound a battleship into submission we need two ships.”

“What about the Scout ships?” Luis suggested.

“Not enough armor. We’re likely to lose them if we send them after those battleships.” Nathan sighed. “I don’t think we have a choice.”

“Captain, those ships are too close to the planet...” Mister Navashee warned.

“What if we just recall the Ghatazhak and leave? We can hit them with KKV’s later, when they aren’t expecting it,” Luis said.

“They’re never going to leave low orbit,” Nathan said, “and if they do, they’ll go to FTL within seconds. We have to strike now and finish them. This wasn’t an ambush. If it had been, they would have spread their ships out all over the place... hidden them all, leaving only a few smaller assets out in the open. They didn’t know what or when it was coming. Now they know. Now they’ve seen how we defeat their biggest assets. We can’t back away now.” Nathan turned to his communications officer. “Ensign Souza, prep a jump comm-drone. I have a message for command.”

Naralena paced back and forth in their suite at the Cetian Liberation Army’s underground facility just outside of the capital, switching back and forth between Jessica’s repeating warning broadcast and other news stations reporting on the battle that raged over Cetia. Jessica’s broadcast had been repeating for five minutes now.

Jessica’s broadcast suddenly stopped, replaced only by a gray screen. Naralena checked the remote to ensure she had not changed feeds. She switched back to another feed, checking to make sure she had not lost all her feeds.

"...getting word now that Cetian security forces have surrounded the broadcast studio and have isolated it from the network," the newscaster reported. "We're also being told that they have no reason to suspect that the repeating broadcast was meant to spread the bio-digital plague to this world..."

Naralena switched feeds again, checking a third one.

"...are looking for these two women," the next newscaster said as two pictures appeared on the screen. They were digitally enhanced photos of both her and Jessica, taken from a security camera at the train station. "The one on the left is the same woman as on the broadcast. The one on the right is believed to be her accomplice. Both women are suspected of being carriers of the plague and should not be approached..."

"What?" Naralena exclaimed. "That doesn't even make sense! Even if the plague still existed, why would we want to infect others?" Naralena looked around the room. "Great, now I'm talking to myself!" She changed to yet another feed.

"...can see in this footage, a Terran combat shuttle attacked and destroyed a convoy of Jung troops on their way to help retake the broadcast studio in the..."

Naralena continued flipping through feeds.

"...have massed on the central district, taking complete control of the area within minutes. Civilians are warned to take shelter as the enemy troops are shooting at anything that moves, both military and civilian..."

"...women, children, if they aren't wearing the same black armor as they are, armed or unarmed, these ruthless Terran soldiers are killing them. The invaders have no sense of..."

"...their ships somehow appear out of thin air. Our technical experts are theorizing that the Terrans have some sort of advanced faster-than-light capabilities, which is why the Jung were attempting to maintain a quarantine around the Sol system to begin with..."

"...this footage, sent to us by a cargo vessel in orbit over Sorenson clearly shows the destruction of an entire battle platform using some kind of Terran super-weapon. If you slow this down, you can clearly see two jets of debris coming out of the platform, a primary one here, and a secondary..."

"...Jung representatives have repeatedly offered a peaceful solution to resolve the dispute with the Terrans. However, we have been told by representatives of the Jung diplomatic corps that there has been no response to their..."

"Jung diplomatic corps! Hah!" Naralena exclaimed, switching feeds again.

"...why the Terrans would want to expose the rest of the core to the same plague that has decimated their world for centuries is beyond understanding. One can only speculate that the plague itself has twisted the minds of their leaders to believe that..."

"I don't know how much more of this I can take," Naralena said as she continued to switch feeds.

"Ten seconds!" Ensign Latfee announced as the combat jump shuttle began to climb up from between the buildings again and decelerate.

"Ghatazhak, stand ready!" Telles ordered as he powered up his energy rifle and turned toward the doorway on his left.

Corporal Davies strafed the rooftops with his energy weapon hanging out the side door in an attempt to keep any would be shooters behind cover instead of shooting at the shuttle as it slowed to deploy the commander and his men.

The shuttle came up to a few meters above the roof of the broadcast studio. Jung soldiers arriving below jumped from their vehicles to open fire on the hovering shuttle.

“Go! Go! Go!” Ensign Latfee ordered.

Commander Telles was the first one out the port door, stepping out into the open air and falling ten meters to the rooftop below. The assist tubules in his combat suit stiffened to protect his knees from the impact of landing, and then immediately released to allow him to hit the roof running for cover. Master Sergeant Jahal landed in the same spot a few seconds later, with the two Ghatazhak soldiers jumping from the other side of the shuttle landing only a few meters behind them.

Ensign Latfee watched out the starboard cockpit window as the Ghatazhak landed. “Four down!” he reported.

“Climbing!” the lieutenant replied as he applied power.

Corporal Davies caught something out of the corner of his eye. A flash of light on the next roof over. He swung his weapon upward to bear on the flash of light, but it was too late. The last thing he saw was a brilliant red light.

The shuttle lurched to starboard.

“We’re hit!” the lieutenant cried out as the shuttle rotated to starboard.

Sergeant Torwell looked down between his legs, spotting Corporal Davies on the floor of the compartment below him, his face and chest still smoldering from the impact of the Jung energy weapon. “Davies is hit!”

“Ellis! Check Davies!” Ensign Latfee ordered.

The shuttle rocked again, its aft end suddenly going downward and to the right, bringing the shuttle's nose up and left.

"Fuck!" the lieutenant exclaimed as he struggled to control the shuttle. "I've lost number four!"

Alarms began sounding in the cockpit and over their comm-sets.

"Davies is dead!" Ellis cried out.

"Who the fuck is shooting at us?" the lieutenant demanded. "Somebody kill that fucker!"

"I've got nothing!" Sergeant Torwell replied as he rotated his turret to port. He looked to his left and saw flames spewing from the top of the aft port engine pod. "Fuck! L-T! We're on fire! Number four is going to go!"

"I'm putting us down!" the lieutenant announced as he struggled with the controls, barely missing the roof of the broadcast studio as the shuttle began to fall from the sky.

"Get out of the bubble, Sarge!" Ensign Latfee ordered.

"Don't gotta tell me twice!" Sergeant Torwell mumbled as he slid down out of the seat, landing on the corpse of Corporal Davies. "Fuck!"

"Hang on!" the lieutenant yelled.

The shuttle plowed into the side of a building across the road from the broadcast studio, smashing into the second floor windows, and then falling tail first to the ground below. Propellant immediately spewed out in all directions, catching fire within seconds.

Commander Telles and Master Sergeant Jahal looked at the crash site from the rooftop across the street.

"I don't suppose you want to go and check on them?" Master Sergeant Jahal asked.

"No time," the commander replied, pointing at several more Jung troop vehicles a few blocks down the road and headed their way. "Call it in, ask for another shuttle," he added as he headed for the roof exit door.

"Mobile Two, Jahal," the master sergeant began as he followed his commander. "We have a jumper down. Jumper One is down at our location."

"Jahal, Mobile Two. We copy. Vectoring Jumpers Nine and Twelve to your location. E.T.A., three minutes. We'll try to get some air cover as well. Plenty of fast movers on their way down from orbit."

"The battleships?" Master Sergeant Jahal asked as he entered the stairwell behind Commander Telles.

"Affirmative."

Mister Bryant frowned as his communications officer passed him the message. He turned toward the Admiral. "The Jung had two additional battleships in hiding," he began.

"Where?" Admiral Dumar wondered.

"Behind a small moon orbiting the third gas giant in the Tau Ceti system."

"We cold-coasted that system several times," the admiral insisted, frustration in his tone.

"If they were tucked away between this moon and the parent planet, they would be extremely difficult to detect, especially with passive sensors. Due to the heavy traffic in the system, most of our recon was done from considerable distance, in order to avoid detection and maintain the element of surprise."

"Instead, the surprise was on us." Admiral Dumar thought for a moment. "How did we learn of this? By

ambush?”

“Fortunately, no. Lieutenant Commander Nash managed to get word to the Ghatazhak, who then relayed the information to the Aurora, only minutes before the hidden battleships revealed themselves.”

“Of course, the presence of those ships dramatically changes things,” the admiral said. “Those ships carry significant forces that they can deploy to the surface, and the Ghatazhak have a difficult enough assignment as it is.”

“The battleships have already sent additional troops to the surface.”

“How many?”

“Undetermined at this point. The Aurora has already engaged the two battleships, but they do not believe they can take them both out without suffering significant, if not catastrophic, damage. They are recommending another KKV strike.”

“Is that even viable?” Dumar wondered. “Surely, after seeing their other major assets destroyed, they are not going to remain stationary long enough...”

“They are currently in low orbit over Kohara,” Mister Bryant interrupted, “very low orbit.”

“They’re using the planet as protection,” the admiral surmised. “They must have figured out how we took the other assets down so easily.”

“It would not be difficult to determine.”

“No, it would not.”

“The Jung obviously believe that we would not risk inadvertently striking a heavily populated planet with such weapons.”

“A logical conclusion,” the admiral agreed, “although I doubt the Jung would have such concerns, should the roles be reversed.” Admiral Dumar took a breath and let it out

slowly. "I don't suppose Captain Scott is offering any recommendations?"

"He is." Mister Bryant looked at the Admiral.

"I thought so," the admiral replied, getting the message from the look in his subordinate's eyes. "If we strike from an angle that guarantees the safety of the planet, we greatly reduce our chances of destroying the targets."

"What if we adjust that angle to one that, if the target *is* missed, the result would be a glancing blow to Kohara?"

"Kohara has a population of over three billion," Admiral Dumar reminded him. "Even a glancing blow is likely to wipe out half of them. If not immediately, then over time. It is a risk we cannot take." Admiral Dumar sighed. "We have four KKV's left. Have them positioned for a minimum safe strike angle. Two KKV's per target, spaced properly along each target's orbital path. Launch when ready."

"And if we miss?"

"If we miss, the Jung will likely not even know we took the shot. If time permits, we will pick up the KKV's on the far side and try again."

"We could just leave and try again later," Mister Bryant suggested. "Wait for a better moment..."

"There will not be a better moment," the admiral insisted, "and with all the additional Jung fighters providing close air support, we'd likely lose half our ground forces in a withdrawal." The admiral sighed again. "No, we must destroy those battleships, now. Once they are gone, our forces can dig in and wait for the Jung air cover to run out of fuel. Meanwhile, make sure that we have destroyed any surface support bases for those Jung fighters. We don't want them refueling on the ground."

In systematic fashion, Jung soldiers sent a continuous stream of energy weapons fire through the broken windows and doors of the front of the broadcast studio. Red bolts from varying directions struck all about the reception counter in the lobby, and the wall directly behind, as well as the ceiling above, sending bits and pieces of the inside structures flying in all directions.

Gerard's men tried to return fire, but the incoming fire was so intense that they could not take the risk.

Jessica was crouched on her knees behind the counter, just like the others, trying to protect herself from flying debris as the energy bolts continued to pound their position. She could feel the heat of the Jung energy weapons, especially in the reinforced reception counter that was slowly heating up from countless strikes. She looked at Gerard a meter away. "They're going to keep this up as they advance!" Jessica yelled above the constant noise of the firefight. "We have to fall back! Down the corridor and back to the studio!"

"And then what?" Gerard replied. "They've probably got all the exits covered!"

"We hold until help arrives!" Jessica answered as she turned to move toward the main corridor.

"And if they do not arrive in time?" Gerard wondered.

"Then we die!"

Gerard pulled out a homemade grenade and activated it, tossing it over the counter into the middle of the lobby.

The grenade detonated, and the weapons fire stopped. Jessica rose and started backing down the main corridor, rising up from her crouch just enough to return fire, her shots barely clearing the top of the reception counter. Gerard rose next, backing down the corridor as he fired in the same fashion, sweeping left and right aimlessly through

the cloud of dust and smoke, providing cover fire for his last two men.

As soon as all of them were returning fire, Jessica turned and ran down the corridor. The Jung opened fire, again sending bits of the walls and ceiling flying all about her.

Gerard continued backing down the corridor, firing along the way. One of his men took a direct blast to the face, sending him tumbling over backwards. The second man took a hit in the left shoulder, sending him spinning to the left, but he managed to stay on his feet and run down the corridor. Gerard continued to return fire, moving quickly backwards as his last man passed him by.

Jessica ducked around the right corner of the corridor, then came back around to open fire.

The corridor was dark, filled with dust lingering in the air, and lit only by the red flashes of light as the Jung energy weapons flew down the hallway. "Firing on your left!" she warned Gerard and his last man. She again opened fire, sending a steady barrage of energy weapons fire down the corridor, barely missing her friends.

Gerard turned around and ran, following his wounded friend, the two of them finally ducking around the corner to the left, opposite of Jessica. Jessica dashed across the corridor to join them on the other side. She grabbed two homemade grenades from the wounded man's vest pockets. "How the fuck do these work, again?" she yelled.

"Twist the top caps, then push them down!" Gerard replied as he helped his friend. "Ten second fuse!" He turned to his wounded man, questioning him in Cetian. The man nodded, and readied his weapon with his good arm.

Jessica did as instructed, arming both grenades. After a few seconds, she tossed the first one all the way to the reception counter where they had been a moment ago, and

the second one about halfway down the corridor. "Go!" she yelled.

The three of them charged down the corridor, away from the intersection and toward the news studio at the end of the hallway. The first grenade detonated, sending a muffled thud reverberating down the corridors. The second grenade was far louder. Jessica felt like someone had slapped her ears, which were now ringing.

They burst through the studio doors, and immediately headed for the anchor desk at the far side.

"What the fuck kind of grenades are those?" she yelled.

"Very simple devices," Gerard replied. "Very powerful. Explosive cores, packed with bearings, incendiary compounds, and smoke agents."

"They might be a bit too powerful," Jessica commented as she stretched her jaw to try and clear her ears.

"There is no such thing," Gerard replied as he looked around the studio. "You take the anchor desk. We will go to either side of the set. That way they cannot take us all down with one well-placed grenade."

"Great," Jessica mumbled as she headed for the anchor desk. "I get to be the one in the kill zone." She moved across the studio, grabbing a large, rolling cabinet full of electronic gear and dragging it behind her. There was a pounding sound, and a muffled holler. She looked at the control booth, where one of the studio staff had apparently been hiding. The man was pounding on the window and yelling something at her, which she decided to ignore. She pushed the cabinet in front of the anchor desk, and then knocked it over to add a layer of protection. Sparks flew from the cabinet when it hit the floor, followed by a puff of white smoke. She glanced at the control booth as she

moved around the anchor desk. The man was holding his head and looked like he was about to explode.

Jessica smiled as she moved behind the desk, then stopped in her tracks, looking down. Hiding behind the anchor desk, squatting on the floor, was the newscaster. "Not a great place to hide," she told the woman.

The newscaster looked up at Jessica with a terrified expression. "Where should I go?" she asked in an almost inaudible voice.

"Anywhere but here, lady. This is the kill zone." Jessica waited for a response, or a movement, but the terrified young woman was paralyzed with fear and doubt. Jessica suddenly felt sorry for the girl. "Maybe you should go join your friends in the control room over there?"

"Here they come!" Gerard yelled.

"Maybe not," Jessica said as she ducked down. Several energy bolts flew over her head, blasting through the set wall behind her.

Gerard returned fire from the right side of the room as his injured friend fired from the left, both of them concentrating their fire on the only doorway into the studio.

Jessica looked at the newscaster, who was now even more terrified than ever. "What's your name?"

"Are we going to die?" The woman asked.

Jessica peeked up over the desk and fired several shots, then came back down to look at the girl again. "What's your name?"

"Kata," she replied. "Kata Mun."

"Kata." Jessica fired a few more shots. "We're not going to die, got it?"

Kata nodded, although she did not appear convinced.

The firefight quickly escalated, as the Jung soldiers increased their rate of fire in an attempt to get through the

door and into the studio. Jessica kept popping up to fire, then quickly dropping back behind the desk. Within seconds, she was no longer able to do anything but cower on the floor next to Kata, as Jung energy bolts tore apart the top of the desk, sending bits and pieces flying about. The set wall behind them caught fire, becoming engulfed in a wall of flames seconds later.

"This was a really bad plan," Jessica mumbled. She looked at Kata. "Okay, I may have been wrong a moment ago." Kata looked at her with confusion. "You know, about the dying part?"

The sound of weapons fire suddenly increased, albeit somewhat muffled, as if from deeper in the corridor beyond the doorway. The Jung soldiers came pouring into the studio, despite the hail of energy weapons fire coming from Gerard and his cohort on either side of the studio.

"Damned if I'm gonna die hiding behind a desk!" Jessica said as she rose to her feet and opened fire.

The room was full of Jung, perhaps twenty in total, rushing in all directions. Three of them were charging toward Jessica. She shot the first one square in the chest, then another shot in the face, causing him to tumble forward. More energy weapons fire streaked in from behind the charging Jung soldiers, but it was of a different color... more of an amber than the bright red of the Jung weapons.

Jessica fired again, striking another Jung soldier in the shoulder and sending him spinning around and falling to her right. Her third shot missed a Jung soldier charging toward her. He jumped up onto the electronics cabinet that she had knocked over in front of the desk, then onto the shattered desktop, jumping forward toward Jessica.

Jessica swung her rifle around, striking the diving Jung soldier in the face with the butt of the weapon as she

twisted to her right to avoid his attack. The soldier fell past her, crashing through the burning back set wall. Another Jung soldier jumped up over the desk in the same fashion. Jessica spun back around just as the soldier slammed into her, knocking her backward. There was a sudden, intense sensation of heat as they fell backward, followed by the smell of burning flesh. They landed on top of the first Jung soldier as he tried to get back to his feet. Jessica pushed the second soldier off of her, rolling him to one side. Then she felt herself being heaved upward, rolling off the soldier she was lying on top of to the opposite side and landing face down among bits of smoldering scenery, with flames burning all around. She scrambled to her feet, but was instantly caught by one of the soldiers, his arm around her neck. She heard a nearby sound, and instantly recognized it as the sound of a knife being pulled from its sheath. She tried to jam her free elbow into the soldier's side, but his body armor protected him. She was trapped.

There was a sudden, sickening sound. A gurgling of something, and then a slicing sound. The man on top of her tensed up. She wondered for a moment if her adrenaline was masking the pain of being sliced open from behind. Had she been stabbed in the back? Had her throat been sliced open? Would her death be pain free, or would the pain suddenly wash over her as the adrenalin drained from her body along with her blood?

The soldier's grip around her neck loosened. A moment later, he was no longer on top of her. There was still the sound of sporadic weapons fire, as well as the sound of hand-to-hand combat.

I'm not dead.

Jessica jumped back to her feet, spinning around to face her next attacker. Instead, standing before her was

Commander Telles. "Ha!" she laughed. "Thanks."

"You are quite welcome." Telles looked at her shoulder. "I believe you are on fire."

Jessica looked to her right and saw that her jacket was smoldering. "Right," she replied as she removed the garment. "What took you so long?"

"We were a little busy."

"I take it you got my message?"

"Indeed. The Aurora has been notified."

"Then they're alright? Where are the battleships now?"

"They are in very low orbit over Kohara," Telles explained. "They are currently making our job quite difficult." Telles tapped his comm-set. "Aurora, Telles. We have Lieutenant Commander Nash."

"Telles, Aurora. Copy you have Nash. Be advised, Tango Zulu, ten mikes."

"What the hell is Tango Zulu?" Jessica wondered.

"Current code name for a KKV strike."

"At targets in low orbit?" Jessica said. "Isn't that a bit risky?"

"I'm sure command has considered the risks," Commander Telles said.

"Telles, Jumper Nine. We're over you now. Jumper Twelve is thirty seconds out. Trooper Four is two out. Be advised, you have a Jung column inbound from the east. Estimate their arrival in five minutes."

"Nine, Telles. Copy. Do we have any Falcons coming?"

"Telles, Falcon Four, we'll be on them in two minutes," Loki's voice reported.

"Falcon Four, Telles, copy that." Telles turned to Jessica. "We should prepare to leave. The extrication shuttle will be here shortly."

“What did you mean?” Kata wondered as she got up off the floor. “What risk? To who? To Kohara?”

“The risk is minimal,” Commander Telles insisted.

“Then why did that guy need to warn you about it?”

“In case something unforeseen was to take place, it is better to be...”

“What do you mean, unforeseen?”

“Look, Kata,” Jessica interrupted. “The only way for us to defeat assets like battleships and battle platforms is to hit them with FTL kinetic kill vehicles. Usually we target ships when they are nowhere near a planet; that way we can strike at a ninety degree angle. Makes for an easier to hit target. But the Jung know that, and are using your planet as a shield.”

“Then the risk must be great,” Kata concluded. “Otherwise they’d have no reason to believe that strategy would work, right?”

“We’ll try to strike at a safe angle,” Jessica assured her.

“What gives you people the right to do such things?” she asked, becoming infuriated.

“Look, we didn’t start this fight,” Jessica said, “but we’re damned sure going to finish it.”

“At what cost?” Kata demanded. “How many worlds have you destroyed? How many more must die to save Earth?”

“It is not about saving Earth,” Commander Telles said, interrupting the young woman. “It is about saving all worlds. Those in the Sol sector, those in the Pentaurus sector, and all the lost colonies of Earth that the Jung will eventually find and conquer, for it is only a matter of time before they too acquire jump drive technology. Once they do, there will be no stopping them.” Commander Telles looked her with his usual serious expression. “Now, you can either help us, or

stand aside. However, if you attempt to impede us, I shall kill you, without hesitation or remorse.”

Kata looked at Telles for a moment, then looked at Jessica.

“I wouldn’t test him if I were you.”

Kata looked at Commander Telles again. “Can we at least warn people?”

“Not without tipping our hand to the Jung,” Jessica said.

“What?” Kata asked.

“Revealing our plan,” Jessica explained.

“Can’t we just tell them to take cover, that it’s too dangerous outside. Go underground, or something like that? You don’t have to tell them how or why, not even when. Just find someplace safe and hide.”

Telles shrugged.

“I don’t know,” Jessica said. “I think I may have broken some of your stuff.” Jessica pointed at the electronics cabinet lying on its side, covered with scorch marks from Jung weapons fire.

“All we need is one camera,” Kata explained. “Even a portable field camera will do. Then we upload it and transmit on a loop, just like we did with yours.”

Jessica looked at Telles. “What do you think?”

“As long as no details are revealed.”

“I think she’d be a better choice,” Jessica said, looking at Kata. “After all, my Cetian isn’t that great.”

“She’s right,” Kata said. “The people know me. They trust me. We’re the highest-rated news service in the system.”

Commander Telles did not look pleased. “Very well, but I warn you. Attempt to deceive me, or in any way warn the Jung of our intentions, and you *will* die.”

She watched as Telles walked away, barking orders at some of his men.

"Where did you find that guy?" Kata asked.

"Deep freeze," Jessica said, "or so I'm told."

The interceptor's canopy went from opaque gray to clear, revealing the evening sky over Cetia again.

"Left ten and down twenty," Loki instructed.

"Taking it down to the streets," Josh replied as he brought the Falcon slightly left and dropped their nose to descend.

"Convoy, two kilometers ahead. Count four vehicles."

"I've got cannons, you've got the turret?" Josh assumed.

"Works for me."

"I'll set them up, and you knock them off."

The Falcon dove down between the buildings, lining up with the wide boulevard.

"One kilometer, five seconds," Loki announced.

Energy weapons fire from a turret on top of one of the vehicles began firing, sending red streaks of energy toward them.

"Are you kidding me?" Josh said as he squeezed the trigger on his control stick. Bursts of red-orange plasma shot out of the Falcon's wing-mounted cannons, slamming into the street in front of the approaching convoy. The street exploded, sending chunks of asphalt in all directions and forcing the convoy to come to a screeching halt.

Loki drew a circle with his finger on the target display, encompassing all five elements in the convoy, then locked the turret onto the group. "Targets locked, turret is tracking." He pressed the auto-fire button. "Firing."

The turret began sending a steady barrage of energy bolts into the targets, adjusting its track to compensate for the interceptor's movement, while switching between each element of the convoy to put an equal number of hits on each one. It continued tracking as the Falcon flew overhead, finally ceasing fire as soon as they passed and the turret no longer had a clear line of fire.

Loki switched to the rear targeting cameras and zoomed in. "Target destroyed."

"Next target?" Josh asked.

"Are you kidding?" Loki asked, looking at the threat display. There were at least fifty icons representing Jung fighters on his display, at various locations and altitudes. "Take your pick."

"What's nearest?"

Loki looked at the display again. "There's a four-group element about one hundred kilometers to the west, at seven thousand. Course indicates they're headed this way."

"Are they headed for Telles?"

"How am I supposed to tell at that range?"

"Anything local?"

"Two Jung combat shuttles, two two zero, five kilometers, at two hundred meters," Loki replied. "How about we take them with missiles, then jump out to engage the fighters?"

"Sounds good," Josh replied. "Turning to two two zero."

"Locking missiles on targets," Loki replied. "Opening bay doors. Good locks. Firing."

Two missiles fell from the Falcon's belly, their engines igniting a second later.

Josh glanced outside as the two missiles streaked away. "Good launch. New heading?"

"One five seven, up four."

"One five seven, up four," Josh replied, turning back to the right and pitching up.

"Jumping in five seconds," Loki said.

"Jump, shoot, jump, then jump back again?"

"That's the plan," Loki replied as the canopy turned opaque again. Loki watched his threat display repaint, all the icons suddenly shifting to new positions as they came out of the jump and the canopy turned clear again. "Targets, dead ahead, four kilometers and closing fast, slightly below. Pitch down and take them from above."

"Pitching down to attack," Josh replied.

"Two kilometers," Loki warned. "Two are peeling off to our right, the lead two still on course. One kilometer."

"You take the two peeling off, and I'll take the two in front," Josh said, squeezing the cannon trigger again.

Red-orange balls of plasma left the wing cannons again, streaking across the sky and slamming into the first Jung fighter. The second fighter rolled to his right and dove, evading the incoming fire.

"Got one," Josh announced.

"Got two," Loki replied.

"Can you tag him with a chaser?"

"I can sure try," Loki replied as he opened their bay doors again. "Target locked. Arming chaser. Launching."

Another missile dropped out of the bay. Its engine lit up, and the missile immediately dove and turned to the left, executing a quick U-turn to pursue the evading Jung fighter.

"Come to three zero five and down five," Loki instructed.

"Three zero five, down five," Josh replied.

"Jumper Nine, Falcon Four, immediate threats cleared. On cover in ten seconds."

"What are you trying to do, jinx us?" Josh asked.

"Falcon Four, Jumper Nine. Copy that. Extrication in two."

Loki watched as the icon representing the fleeing Jung fighter flashed several times then disappeared from his display. "Love those chasers," he said as he checked their course and pitch angles, and then pressed the jump button.

Naralena continued to flip from one feed to another in her room. She stopped suddenly when she recognized the newscaster as the same one who had been on the air when Jessica had taken control of the studio.

"...learned that the invading forces claim to be liberators from Earth..."

"Oh, my God," she exclaimed, noticing the condition of the anchor desk and the set wall behind her.

"...are not infected with the bio-digital plague, and claim that the plague died out on their world more than nine hundred years ago. They call themselves the Alliance, and are composed of several different worlds from all over the Sol sector and far beyond. They have no desire to rule our system or any other. They promise to return control of our worlds to us after they have removed all Jung forces from our system. The Alliance is urging all Cetians to take shelter, preferably underground if possible, until the conflict is over. Do not engage the Alliance, not even to help them, as they cannot distinguish friend from foe. Anyone carrying a weapon will be killed without delay, so please, do not arm yourselves. Stay hidden, stay out of the way, and stay safe. Again, this reporter has learned that the invading forces claim to be liberators from..."

"Get the lieutenant out!" Ensign Latfee yelled at the approaching rescue team. He turned to Sergeant Torwell.

"You two carry Davies. I'll stay with the lieutenant until they get him out!"

"Yes, sir!" Sergeant Torwell replied. He looked at Ellis as they bent over and picked up the body of their dead door gunner. "You two friends?" he asked.

"I just met the guy last week," Ellis replied.

Two more men ran up to them. "We can take him, guys," they offered.

"We've got him," Sergeant Torwell insisted. They began walking quickly toward the troop shuttle that had just landed nearby.

Commander Telles, Jessica, Gerard, and the surviving members of the studio staff came out the front of the broadcast building, followed by Master Sergeant Jahal and the other two members of Commander Telles's team. They moved quickly down the path and to the waiting shuttle.

Jessica stopped as they approached the shuttle. "What about them?" she asked Telles.

"What about them?"

"We're extricating them as well, right?"

"Why?"

"We can't just leave them here. This place is a fucking war zone."

Kata looked at one of her colleagues who was carrying a porta-cam. He turned it on and tucked it under his arm as if casually carrying it, while aiming it at Jessica and the commander.

Commander Telles immediately noticed the camera, but paid it little attention. "The entire planet is a war zone right now, and I do not have the resources to ferry them about."

"Where is this shuttle going?"

"Back to Porto Santo."

"Not the Aurora?" Jessica asked.

"The Aurora is engaged with the battleships," Telles explained. "I doubt we could catch her in one place long enough to land."

"Where is Porto Santo?" Kata wondered.

"Earth," Jessica replied.

"Well, take us there."

"What?"

"I can report your side of the story," Kata suggested, "tell my people what's really going on out there, what the Jung really are."

Both Jessica and Telles looked at her with skepticism.

"Look, if the Jung are really what you say they are, then prove it. Show us!"

"What's in it for you?" Jessica asked.

"Only the biggest story since the plague!"

Jessica looked at Telles.

"The idea has merit," Telles admitted. He looked at Kata. "I cannot promise you anything, Miss Dun. I cannot even promise that any of you will ever be able to return to your world, should you choose to come with us now."

"Deal," Kata replied. She turned and looked at the others.

"I've got a family," the man holding the porta-cam under his arm said.

"So do I," the next man said.

"I don't. I'll go," the third man announced. He stepped up and took the camera from the first man, making no attempt to hide the fact that it was on and recording from anyone.

"Great!" Kata replied. She turned back to Jessica and Telles. "Just Karl and I." She looked back at the man. "It's Karl, right?"

"It's Karahl, actually."

"Right." She turned back to Jessica. "Just Karahl and I."

"Great," Jessica said. "What about Naralena?" Jessica asked Telles.

"I have her coordinates," the commander replied. "I will see that she is extricated as well."

"She is quite safe where she is," Gerard insisted. "My people will take good care of her."

"I will retrieve her in short order, you have my word," Telles promised.

"Tango zulu, remember?"

"I remember," Telles insisted.

Jessica turned and headed for the shuttle, with Kata, Karahl, and Gerard and his wounded comrade following close behind, working their way around and up the back boarding ramp. Kata paused for a moment, halfway up the ramp, looking back at Commander Telles. "He's not going with us?" she asked.

"Nope, I guess not," Jessica replied.

Karahl pointed the camera at Sergeant Torwell as he and Ellis carried the body of Corporal Davies up the ramp, followed a moment later by Ensign Latfee and two rescue men carrying the injured Lieutenant Kainan.

"Where is he going, then?" Kata asked as the commander walked away with his master sergeant.

"Well, he *is* in command of all Alliance ground forces in this sector, so I guess he's going to command them," Jessica replied.

Kata watched the commander walk away. "Hmm. He looked so young." She turned and followed Jessica and Karahl up the ramp.

The troop shuttle ramp began to raise, and the shuttle spun up its four massive engines to full power, rising slowly off the deck. The ship began to rotate to port as it climbed

up above the buildings, then began to ease into forward flight as soon as it was clear.

"How long will it take us to get to Earth?" Kata asked.

"Five or ten minutes, maybe," Jessica replied.

Kata laughed. "No, really."

"Really."

"KKVs should launch in two minutes," Luis reported from the Aurora's tactical station.

"Climbing starboard turn, Mister Chiles," Nathan ordered. "Bring us back around for another attack run."

"Climbing right turn, aye," the helmsman replied.

"We'll come in high this time. Increase your speed three percent. We have to keep their weapons operators guessing. As soon as you're set for the jump, bring our nose around and down so that we're ready to fire as soon as we come out of the jump."

"End point?" the navigator asked.

"We should vary that as well," Nathan replied. "We'll come out on the second battleship this time. Above and abeam her stern." Nathan turned to his sensor operator. "Mister Navashee, how long would you say it takes their big guns to lock on a track?"

"Ten seconds, maybe," Mister Navashee answered. "Depends on how far off target they are when they change tracks."

"Then let's be sure we jump out within eight seconds, maximum," Nathan continued.

"We can reduce the number of potential guns on us by always keeping one target between us and the other target," Luis suggested.

“Won’t work,” Nathan replied. “It narrows our attack corridor too much, makes it easier for their guns to reacquire. Besides, we can’t really jump in under the lower target if she’s launching shuttles or fighters. Too much risk of collision, which would do just as much damage as a direct hit by their rail guns. We have to hit them from as many different angles as possible, making completely random changes to attack angles, speed, jump points, and time in the fire zone.”

“That’s going to make it awfully difficult to target the same shield section each time,” Luis warned.

“Better than getting shot to hell.”

“Why not just play it safe and stand clear, maybe take a few shots from a distance?”

“If we don’t press the attack as hard as we can, they’ll know that we’re setting up for another KKV attack. We have to make them think that we’re desperate... that attacking them this way is our only option. Just keep as many of the shots as possible on the same shield sections. Our job here is to bluff them into a false sense of superiority, not take them out on our own.”

“One minute to launch,” Luis announced.

“Turn complete,” the helmsman reported. “Bringing our nose over.”

“Jump plotted and ready,” Mister Riley reported.

“How long will it take the KKV’s to reach their targets once launched?” Nathan asked.

“They’re launching from pretty close in, so about forty seconds,” Luis replied. “Thirty seconds to launch.”

“As soon as the KKV’s launch, execute the jump,” Nathan instructed.

Mister Riley glanced at the time displays on the main view screen, noting the time to impact. “Recalculating

jump.”

“Fifteen seconds to launch.”

“Our escape jump from the attack run will be fifteen light seconds in range.” Nathan added.

“Aye, sir,” Mister Riley reported as he finished recalculating their next attack jump. “Attack jump plotted and ready.”

“Five seconds to launch,” Luis continued.

“Escape jump reset to fifteen light seconds.”

“Three...”

“Attack attitude established,” Mister Chiles reported.

“...all forward tubes and cannons ready to fire.”

“Jumping,” Mister Riley reported.

Nathan closed his eyes momentarily as the jump flash translated in subdued fashion through the main view screen, bathing the bridge in additional blue-white light.

“Jump complete.”

“Tubes are on target! Firing all forward tubes and cannons!” Luis announced.

The bridge began to flash repeatedly with red-orange light as sixteen balls of highly charged plasma streaked from the sides of the main view screen inward, each of them disappearing in the distance at the center of the screen only a split second after they were fired.

“All torpedoes away!” Luis reported.

“Jumping,” Mister Riley announced.

“Time?” Nathan inquired.

“Ten seconds in the fire zone,” Mister Navashee replied.

“We’ve got to do better than that,” Nathan urged.

“Twenty seconds to KKV impact.”

“Come about with a descending turn to port,” Nathan ordered. “We’ll target the same ship again, but from below.”

“Descending turn to port, aye,” Mister Chiles replied.

"Ten seconds to impact," Luis continued.

"Captain!" Mister Navashee exclaimed. "The lead battleship is changing course!"

"What?" Nathan stood suddenly.

"She's turning to port!"

"Five seconds."

"How much?"

"Three degrees! No, five!"

"What about the second..."

"Impact in three..."

"Second battleship is holding course!"

"...Two..."

"Wait! Second battleship is turning!"

"...One..."

"Two degrees... to starboard!"

"...Impact!" Luis announced.

Nathan held his breath, staring at the back of Mister Navashee's head for what seemed an eternity.

"Impact confirmed!" Mister Navashee finally reported. "But only one! The second battleship was hit in her stern! She's coming apart!"

"What about the first battleship?" Nathan asked.

"Negative, sir," Mister Navashee replied. "No damage. Two clean misses."

Nathan tried to keep his frustration from showing. "Helm, adjust course to the remaining battleship. Mister Riley, plot a new jump. Same attack strategy."

"Changing course to intercept remaining target," Mister Chiles replied.

"Plotting new jump," Mister Riley acknowledged.

"Captain, they're changing course again," Mister Navashee stated. "Seven degrees to starboard."

"They're zigzagging," Nathan said. "If they weren't before, they sure as hell are now."

"They're bringing their big guns around," Mister Navashee added.

"To target us?"

"No, sir."

"What then?"

"I have no idea," Mister Navashee admitted.

"Comms, contact Jumpers One and Two and tell them to retrieve the KKV's that missed and get them back into firing positions as quickly as possible."

"That will take time," Luis warned. "Time that we don't have."

"Not much choice, is there?"

"Course change complete," Mister Chiles reported.

"Attack jump plotted and locked," Mister Riley added.

Nathan sighed, summoning up his resolve. "Let's hit them again, gentlemen."

Commander Telles jumped up into the combat jumper, followed by Master Sergeant Jahal and his two Ghatazhak soldiers. He tapped the comm-control on the side of his helmet, switching to the jumper's intercom. "Pilot! Get me to Mobile Two!"

"Aye, sir!" the pilot replied.

Telles tapped his comm-control again. "Aurora, Telles. Status on the Tango Zulu?"

"Telles, Aurora. One down, one to go," Ensign Souza answered.

"What happened?" the commander asked as the combat jumper's engines spun up and the shuttle began to rise quickly off the ground.

"Target went evasive. We're going to try again."

"How long?"

"At least ten mikes, maybe twelve."

The combat shuttle turned sharply to the left and began to accelerate into forward flight as it continued to climb.

"Copy that. Telles out." The commander switched channels again. "Mobile Two, Telles."

"Go for Mobile Two."

"Sit-rep?" Telles asked as the door gunners activated the doors on either side.

"Their close air support is making things a bit challenging, sir. It sure would be nice if they'd stop sending down troops and air cover."

Telles looked at the door gunner in front of him. "Why'd you close them?"

"We're doing micro-jumps everywhere!" the door gunner explained. "Makes it more difficult for the Jungers on the ground to target us!"

"What's the status on the Tango Zulu?" the lieutenant asked over the comms.

Telles returned to his communication with Mobile Two. "Tango Zulu went fifty-fifty," he told the lieutenant. "They're taking another shot in ten to twelve. Can you hold?"

"No way, sir," the lieutenant responded. *"Not with all the close air support the Jung are throwing at us. We're down to ten combat jumpers, and only a few troop jumpers. We've also lost more than thirty percent force strength. I have no idea how many Falcons are left, as I haven't heard from any of them since Falcon Four cleared the skies above your last position."*

"Order all airborne assets except the Falcons out of the area," the commander ordered. "Order all ground forces to stop trying to advance and dig in and hold position

wherever they can, until we can get rid of some of the air cover for you.”

“Understood.”

“I’ll be at your position shortly. Telles out.” The commander looked at his master sergeant, the two of them exchanging looks of concern.

“The Ghatazhak don’t lose, sir,” the master sergeant insisted, just before he offered a grin.

“So I’ve been told,” the commander replied as he tapped his comm-control again.

The windows on the shuttle went opaque as the shuttle jumped across the city at relatively low altitude.

“Aren’t you guys worried about hitting something while jumping so low?” Master Sergeant Jahal asked the starboard door gunner.

“Jump complete,” the copilot announced. “Open ‘em up and find something to shoot at.”

“Better than running into a slammer!” the gunner replied as he activated the starboard door control, causing the door to slide aft into the side bulkhead.

“Slammer?” the master sergeant wondered.

“Nasty little fuckers fired by Jungers on the ground.”

“Why slammer?”

“First you see a little flash, then... Slam! You’re done!” the gunner explained as he pulled his gun down from the ceiling and swung it outward on its mount to lock it into firing position.

“Aurora Actual, Telles,” the commander called over his helmet comms.

“*Telles, go for Aurora Actual,*” Nathan replied.

“Captain, force strength on Kohara is down to seventy percent and falling fast. We are losing air assets with each

passing minute. I'm ordering all jumpers to stand off until the Falcons can get control of the skies."

"Understood," Nathan replied. *"What about your men on the ground?"*

"I'm ordering them to dig in and hold for now. I need you to prevent more support from leaving that last battleship until you can Tango Zulu his ass, or I'm not going to have any forces left down here."

"Can you pull forces from the other two planets?" Nathan asked. *"Air power is next to nothing on the other worlds."*

"We could get them out, but half of them would get shot down before they got here," the commander insisted. "You have to keep that ship from sending any more assets to the surface."

"Can you withdraw?" Nathan wondered.

"The only thing withdrawing will do is to guarantee that *all* my men will die! I need that fucking battleship gone, and I need orbital strikes on about fifty targets as soon as you can make it happen, sir!"

"Understood, Commander. We'll make it happen. Aurora Actual, out."

Master Sergeant Jahal looked at the commander again. "Ghatazhak don't withdraw, either."

"Yeah, I heard that too," the commander replied.

"Captain," Mister Navashee called. "They're sweeping overhead with their big rail guns. Back and forth from side to side. I think they're trying to lay down a flak wall to try and prevent another KKV strike."

"Or to narrow our jump angles and make it easier to target us with the rest of their weapons," Luis observed.

"On the next jump, put us directly astern and a little below her," Nathan ordered. "No more than a few kilometers away, so they can only get a few guns on us."

"We won't be much below," Mister Chiles replied. "The target is already skimming the planet's mesosphere."

"As low as you can, Mister Chiles."

"Jump event," Mister Navashee reported.

"Incoming message from Scout One," Ensign Souza announced. "They were unable to locate two of the KKV's. Scout Two is chasing down the last one now and will have it on station and ready to fire in seven minutes."

"Our people aren't going to last that long," Nathan said.

"On attack course," Mister Chiles reported.

"Comms, order Scouts One and Three to harass that battleship, concentrating on her underside to keep them from deploying more reinforcements, but warn them not to linger too long. Their big guns may be aimed elsewhere, but their point defenses are still a threat."

"Attack jump plotted and locked," Mister Riley reported.

"Ready all forward tubes. Execute your jump."

"Jumping," Mister Riley replied as the jump flash washed over them.

"Target dead ahead, three kilometers, two degrees up," Mister Navashee reported.

"Pitching up two," the helmsman replied.

"Locking all forward tubes onto target," Luis announced.

"Target is bringing her aft guns around," Mister Navashee added. "Dorsal aft missile launchers as well."

"All tubes locked. Firing triplets!" Luis reported.

The bridge flashed repeatedly with the red-orange glow of her plasma torpedoes as they left their tubes and streaked toward the Jung battleship just ahead.

"Hold your jump, fire again!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing triplets again on all tubes!" Luis replied.

Again the bridge flashed red-orange.

"Target is firing," Mister Navashee warned.

"Jump!"

"Jumping," Mister Riley replied as the jump flash again cast a momentary glow of blue-white light across the bridge.

"Helm, plot a crisscross pattern. Side to side, up and down, varying in and out points. I want all our firepower on her aft shields. If she's going to use most of her guns to defend against a KKV strike, let's use that to our advantage."

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles replied.

"I can't fire back-to-back triplets on the main cannons like that," Luis warned. "That last pair put them near the red line. If we're going to fire two rounds like that, I recommend singles on the mains."

"We really need to beef up the heat exchangers on those things," Nathan exclaimed.

"New attack plot is ready, sir," Mister Riley announced.

"Captain," Mister Navashee said, his voice low, "her aft shields are stronger than the rest. The chances of our breaking through them..."

"I know," Nathan interrupted, "but she has fewer guns aft, which means we can linger a few seconds longer and pound her twice as much with each jump."

"But she'll just jump away when her aft shields get too weak, and wait for them to recharge."

"And that will take what, ten minutes? Fifteen? Twenty? It will give us a window of opportunity," Nathan explained.

"An opportunity for what?"

"To find the last two KKV's. To take out a few key Jung strongholds from orbit. To jump in more resources to help out our guys on the ground. Whatever. Don't you see? We

don't have to beat that battleship. We just have to prove to her captain that it's a stalemate. If he knows he can't win, he has no choice but to give up and leave the system to us. Meanwhile, we have to keep harassing him so that he can't keep launching shuttles and fighters. We have to show him that he cannot win this."

"You're assuming that he *will* give up and leave," Luis pointed out. "So far, they've always been willing to fight to the death."

"All the better."

"Unless he drops containment and detonates his antimatter reactors, taking us and half the planet with him," Luis replied.

Nathan turned the rest of the way around to look at Luis. "Good point. Mister Riley," Nathan continued as he rotated forward again, "The lower their shield strength gets, the further away we attack from."

"Understood," the navigator replied.

"And if you get the slightest hint that they're dropping containment, don't wait for an order to jump," Nathan added. "We don't want to end up halfway across the galaxy again."

"Scout Three, Scout One," Captain Poc called over the comms. *"Let's go high low, fore and aft, thirty-two degrees, odds and evens, and always under. We're small, so there's less chance of us hitting a departing shuttle as we pass."*

"Got it," Captain Nash replied. "High low, fore aft, thirty-two, odds and evens. Always under. We'll be ready to start our first run in thirty seconds," he added, looking at Commander Eckert in the right seat.

"Got it," the commander said.

"We'll go in ten. One out."

"Come right twelve and up five," Eckert advised.

"Right twelve, up five," the captain replied as he altered the ship's course.

"Jumping in twenty."

"How are we looking, Donny?" the captain called over his comm-set.

"All systems are good," the lieutenant replied. "Plasma torpedoes show ready."

"Gunners, fire at anything small flying about. You'll only have a ten-second window at the most, so don't second guess. We have no ships in the area, so pick a target and shoot."

"Jumping in ten."

"Set the torpedo cannons to triplets," the captain ordered.

"Torpedo cannons to triplets, snap shots, no locks," the commander replied. "Five seconds."

"Cutting power and pitching up," Captain Nash said as he brought their thrust levers to zero and pulled the ship's nose up a full ninety degrees.

"Three..."

"Nose up ninety," Captain Nash reported.

"...Two..."

"Torpedoes armed."

"...One.....jumping."

The Scout ship suddenly shook violently, as if they had collided with something as they came out of their jump.

Captain Nash looked out his forward view screen. Despite the fact that they were a full kilometer below the enemy battleship, its underside still filled his entire screen as they passed underneath the target from its starboard to port.

"Firing!"

Six red-orange balls of plasma energy streaked away from the Scout ship's torpedo tubes mounted along the outer edges of their main drive section. The plasma struck the battleship's shields, causing them to flash a brilliant, semi-opaque blue with each torpedo impact.

"Are we hit?" Lieutenant Scalotti asked over comms.

"Something hit us, that's for sure," Ensign Agari replied.

The captain pulled the nose up further, trying to keep it pointed at the same spot on the underside of the Jung battleship as they passed under her. "Firing again!"

"Everything looks good," Donny insisted.

"Jumping!" Commander Eckert announced as their second round of plasma torpedoes struck the target's shields.

"I don't think it was weapons fire," Ensign Agari said. "I think it was just debris."

"Anybody hit anything interesting?" Captain Nash wondered.

"I never saw a target," Sergeant Ravi replied.

"They were all over the fucking place!" Ensign Agari insisted.

"Maybe you should call them out, Toosh," Captain Nash suggested.

"These things need to have some sort of automatic seek and lock system," Sergeant Poteet said.

"I'll be sure to tell the admiral," Captain Nash replied as he brought the ship around for another attack jump. "Look, if you don't have a target within a couple of seconds of jumping in, just fire and sweep. Better to shoot and not hit anything than *not* shoot and not hit anything."

"Maybe we should jump in a little further out next time?" Donny suggested. "Avoid some of the debris?"

"The further out we are the easier it is for their guns to track us," Commander Eckert explained.

"This ain't a democracy, guys," Captain Nash reminded them.

"Two zero four," Commander Eckert directed, "down three."

"Two zero four, down three," Nash replied as he turned to the new heading and brought their nose down slightly.

"Jumping," the commander announced. "New course, zero three seven, two up relative. Next jump in twenty seconds."

"Zero three seven, two up," the captain replied. "How are our torpedo cannons holding up?"

"The extra exchangers on the outside are helping," Lieutenant Scalotti replied, "but I wouldn't fire more than two triplets in a row. It's been a minute now, and they've only dissipated half of their built-up heat so far."

"Five seconds."

"Pitching up forty," Nash announced. "I'll make it a single this time, Donny."

"Jumping."

"Targets at twelve, three low, five low, six high, seven high..."

"Firing triplets!" Captain Nash reported as he pressed the firing button on his flight control stick.

"I've got three!" Sergeant Ravi announced.

"I've got seven!" Sergeant Poteet said.

"Jumping..."

The Scout ship shook violently, its back end lurching to port as it went into a spin.

"What the fuck!" Captain Nash exclaimed as he struggled to regain attitude control of the Scout ship.

"Did we jump?" Sergeant Ravi wondered.

"Jump systems are offline!" Donny reported.

Captain Nash looked out his forward view screen as the Jung battleship, still only a kilometer away, passed quickly across his view screen from left to right. "We're still in the fire zone!"

"Mains are down! Maneuvering is at ten percent!" Donny reported.

"Hull breach, dorsal surface, port side!" Sergeant Ravi added.

"I'm losing reactors three and four!" Donny added.

"Shut them down!" the captain ordered. "Wellsy! Mayday!"

"Mayday, mayday, mayday!" Ensign Wells called out over the ship-to-ship comms. "Scout Three is hit! Jump drive is down! Main drive and maneuvering are down! Running on half power!"

"Fuck! Donny! Give me something to work with here!"

"I'm trying!" Lieutenant Scalotti replied as he frantically tried to reroute systems to offer his captain some control over the ship's attitude. "Goddamn it! I'm losing shit all over the place!"

"We can't bail while we're spinning," the captain reminded him. "We'll end up hurtling toward Kohara or slamming into the underside of that battleship!"

"Should we keep firing?" Sergeant Poteet wondered.

"No!" Donny insisted. "I need the power!"

"This thing is fucking useless!" Captain Nash declared in frustration, as he finally gave up and released the flight control stick.

"I can blow the port-side, aft thruster pod!" Lieutenant Scalotti suggested. "The detonation might slow our spin and rotation enough to eject safely, *if* we time it right!"

“Blow as in detonate?” Commander Eckert asked, surprised by the engineer’s suggestion.

“Yes, sir!”

“That’ll leave us adrift!”

“What the hell do you think we are now?” Donny replied. “Fuck! I just lost reactor two! Captain?”

“Do it!” Captain Nash ordered. “Then arm the self-destruct systems! All hands! Prepare to abandon the ship!”

The Scout ship shook again, as a dull distant explosion reverberated through her hull. Captain Nash looked at his view screen again as both their lateral spin and longitudinal rotation began to slow. “It’s working!”

Everything on the flight deck began to shut down. First the lights, then the console.

“I’ve lost reactor one!” Donny announced. “We’re running on batteries!”

Interior emergency lighting snapped on, and a few of the primary flight and systems status displays on the flight deck came back to life as the ship automatically switched over to battery power.

“That’s it,” Captain Nash said as he released his restraints and began to float up out of his flight seat. “Donny, start the self-destruct sequencer! Everyone else, get to your pods, but don’t punch out until I give the order! We’re at zero-G now, so watch yourselves! Don’t forget we’re still spinning and rolling, so keep your hands on the rails at all times!” Captain Nash looked at his copilot, noticing the disappointed look on his face. “What’s wrong, Skeeched?”

“It was only our second pass,” the commander replied.

Captain Nash patted him on the shoulder, pushing off as he passed behind him. “Don’t worry, Skeeched. Just as soon as

they get that assembly line up and running on Tanna, we'll get a shiny new one."

"Scout Three is adrift and running on battery power," Ensign Souza reported. "They're arming their self-destruct and abandoning ship."

"Any chance they'll get their jump drive back online?" Nathan asked Mister Navashee.

"Not a chance. They took that hit right as their jump emitters were at full charge. I doubt any of them are even working right now."

"Mister Riley, new jump. Park us along the target's port side, ten kilometers out, five kilometers astern," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir," Mister Riley replied.

"We'll keep our nose on target and keep firing," Nathan instructed Luis. "Single shots on all tubes and cannons. Use the plasma turret on anything that goes toward Scout Three, and the laser turrets on everything else flying around that isn't ours."

"Understood," Luis replied.

"Mister Riley, what's the shortest escape jump you can make?" Nathan wondered.

"The shortest we've ever jumped is fifteen hundred meters," Mister Riley replied, "but the settings go as low as five hundred. We've just never tried to make a jump that short."

"Well, we are now. If they fire missiles, wait until just before impact and then jump forward anywhere between five hundred and fifteen hundred meters. Your choice, but mix it up each time so as not to be predictable. I don't want to leave the engagement area until I'm sure Scout Three's

jump drive is destroyed, but I also don't want to eat a missile doing so."

"Understood."

"Comms, relay our intentions to Scout Three."

"Aye, sir."

"On course," Mister Chiles reported.

"Next jump, plotted and ready," Mister Riley added.

"Take us in," Nathan ordered.

"Donny, let's go," Ensign Wells said as he floated down the center of the systems deck, passing behind the lieutenant.

"Just a second," Donny replied, "I have to finish arming the..."

Ensign Wells grabbed the overhead rail to steady himself in the weightless environment. He rotated around to look at Lieutenant Scalotti. "Well hurry up and arm it," the ensign exclaimed. He looked at the lieutenant, who wasn't moving. He was just sitting there in his seat, strapped in tight, his hands frozen over his console keys, his eyes staring at the display screen in front of him. "What is it?" the ensign asked, his eyebrows furrowing. "Donny?" There was no response. "Donny, come on. We need to go." He moved closer, floating over against the starboard bulkhead to look at the engineer's face. The lieutenant was not staring at the display screen. He was just staring... at nothing. "Donny?"

Lieutenant Scalotti started moving again. His eyes focused on the display screen, and his fingers began typing in commands at a furious pace.

"Jesus, Donny," Ensign Wells exclaimed. "You scared the fuck out of me. Everyone except the skipper and the XO are

already in their tubes, man. Arm the fucking thing and let's go!"

Lieutenant Scalotti said nothing, only continued to input command strings as he studied the display screen.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Ensign Wells wondered as he turned to look at the display screen. "What the..." The ensign's eyes widened. "Donny! What the fuck are you doing!" he exclaimed as he reached for the lieutenant's hands to try and stop him.

Lieutenant Scalotti grabbed Ensign Wells by the shirt and pulled him closer as he jabbed his left fist into the ensign's throat. Ensign Wells gasped for air as the lieutenant then shoved his head into the console, tearing his forehead open and sending blood spraying across the bulkhead and his display console. The lieutenant shoved the ensign back as hard as he could, sending him, dazed and tumbling, down the compartment and into the hatch.

Commander Eckert came floating down from the flight deck into the systems compartment, just as Lieutenant Scalotti pushed the dazed Ensign Wells across the compartment, causing the ensign to plow headfirst into the hatch, rendering him unconscious. "What the fuck, Scalotti?" the commander yelled as he pulled himself along the overhead hand rail as quickly as possible.

Lieutenant Scalotti swung his left fist out at the commander, striking him in the side of the face, but the commander had a firm hold on the overhead rail. He swung his feet up, kicking the lieutenant in the face, nearly knocking him from his seat, had he not been strapped in.

"What's going on here?" Captain Nash demanded as he came floating down as well.

Scalotti released his harness and lunged out at the commander, grabbing at his throat with both hands, sending

them both tumbling forward.

“Scalotti’s lost it!” the commander yelled.

Captain Nash grabbed Scalotti from behind, prying him away from Commander Eckert enough to get his arm wrapped around the lieutenant’s neck and get him in a head lock.

Lieutenant Scalotti lashed out at Commander Eckert with his right hand, while he repeatedly drove his left elbow into the left side of Captain Nash with all his might.

“Donny! Stand down, goddamn it!” Captain Nash yelled. He moved his legs up around the lieutenant’s body, wrapping them around his thighs as tightly as possible, struggling to hold him and restrain him until he could figure out what was going on, but the lieutenant seemed to possess the strength of several men.

“What the hell happened?” Captain Nash demanded as he struggled to restrain the psychotic engineer. He noticed Ensign Wells, unconscious and floating at the aft end of the compartment. “Wellsy! What the fuck happened to Wellsy?!”

“Scalotti shoved him into the bulkhead!” Commander Eckert replied. “Knocked him out cold!”

“Fucking why?”

“I don’t know!” the commander insisted as he moved to look at the display screen and the engineering station where Lieutenant Scalotti had been working. “What the... Oh, my God!”

Lieutenant Scalotti exploded in a fit of rage, breaking free of the captain’s legs and pushing off against the opposite bulkhead, sending him and the captain flying across the compartment. The captain slammed into the comm console on the port side of the compartment, sending a wave of pain up his spine.

“Fuck!” Captain Nash cried out. “Knock it the fuck off, Donny!”

Lieutenant Scalotti finally managed to twist his way out of the head lock, turning around and grabbing the captain’s face with both hands as he tried to ram his thumbs into the captain’s eyes, causing him to scream in pain.

Commander Eckert pulled the fire bottle from the wall next to the engineering station, then turned around and grabbed the overhead rail to steady himself. He then swung the fire bottle around, striking the lieutenant in the side of the head with the heavy metal fire bottle. The lieutenant released his grip on the captain, dazed by the impact, but the effect did not last. He turned to attack the commander next, but was met with the same fire bottle directly in his face. The impact knocked the lieutenant backwards, sending his head into the edge of the overhead console of the communications station on the port side of the compartment. The impact tore his scalp and cracked his skull, sending blood and cerebral spinal fluid flinging outward in globules that splattered against the deck and bulkheads around him.

Commander Eckert spun around as he tried to steady himself again, letting go of the fire bottle, sending it tumbling through the compartment.

“What the fuck is going on?” Captain Nash demanded in frustration as he felt his eyes for damage, blinking several times as he tried to focus.

“Scalotti somehow managed to fry all the self-destruct control circuits,” the lieutenant commander said as he moved back to the engineering station to look at the display. “He somehow channeled what was left in one of the battery banks into the control circuits.”

“What?”

"He must be working for the Jung," Commander Eckert realized.

"I've known him for ten years!" Captain Nash exclaimed. "There is no way he's a Jung spy!"

"It doesn't matter now, sir! Fact of the matter is, the self-destruct system is useless."

"Fuck!" Captain Nash yelled. "Get to the main bay. Look out the topside scope. When you see black, eject the crew. Then get in your pod and get ready to eject yourself."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll contact the Aurora and tell them to take us out!"

"While you're still on board?"

"Fuck no! I'll be right behind you, Skeeched! Now move!"

Captain Nash pushed the floating body of Lieutenant Scalotti to one side and activated the ship-to-ship channel on the communications console, as Commander Eckert pulled himself to the aft end of the compartment and grabbed Ensign Wells.

"Fritzi! Keesh! Give me a hand!" he called through the hatchway.

"Aurora, Scout Three!" Captain Nash called over his comm-set.

"Scout Three, Aurora, go ahead," Ensign Souza replied.

"Aurora, Scout Three. Self-destruct is down! You need to take us out!"

"Stand by one," Ensign Souza replied.

Captain Nash looked aft as his XO and his crew pulled the unconscious ensign through the hatchway and aft toward the main compartment.

"Scout Three, Aurora Actual," Nathan called over the comms. *"What's going on over there, Nash?"*

"Our self-destruct is down, circuits are fried. You have to take us out. Just give us a few minutes to bail out first."

"How the hell did that happen?" Nathan asked. "Those systems are independent."

"Scalotti did something to them... fried them completely. He must have hooked them into the main power grid at some point." Captain Nash shook his head in disbelief at what he was about to say. "He must have been working for the Jung."

"What?"

"It was Scalotti, Nathan! All along, it must have been Scalotti! He tried to kill us! Now take the fucking shot. Just give us two minutes!"

There was a pause, then half a minute later, Nathan came back. *"That battleship is maneuvering toward you. You'll be inside their shields in just over a minute. That's all I can give you, so I suggest you get the fuck out of there, Captain, because I will take the shot in... fifty-five seconds!"*

"Got it!" Captain Nash replied as he ripped off his comm-set and headed aft. "We gotta go! We gotta go!" he yelled aft as he pulled himself along the overhead rail. "Everybody get in your pods and punch out now!"

"What about the rotation?" the XO wondered.

"No time! The Aurora has to take the shot in less than a minute! Punch out now and take your chances, or die here in forty seconds!"

Commander Eckert and Sergeant Frisch quickly loaded Ensign Wells into his hibernation tube and activated the system. The door slid closed, and a few seconds later the window became empty as the pod shot out the top of the Scout ship. Sergeant Frisch and Sergeant Ravi both got into their tubes and repeated the process, their tubes shooting out the top of the ship moments after their doors closed.

Captain Nash came floating quickly into the main compartment, pulling himself along the overhead rail. "Go-

go-go!" he ordered the XO.

Commander Eckert moved toward his tube and climbed inside, just as Captain Nash reached his tube. "Good luck, sir!"

Captain Nash grabbed the edge of his tube opening and swung himself inside, bouncing against the back wall of the tube from the force of the ship's spin. He twisted himself around, his hands against the side walls to steady himself as he tried to reach the controls to close his door and activate the automated rapid ejection system.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Locking forward tubes and cannons on target," Luis announced.

"Two pods have ejected," Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station. "Scout One has started another attack run. Forty seconds until the target's shields envelop Scout Three. Target is firing rail guns!"

The bridge shook as rail gun fire from the Jung battleship pounded the topside of their hull, sending vibrations from the impacts throughout the ship.

"Firing, all forward tubes and cannons," Luis reported.

"Two more pods have eject... Oh, my God! They're headed right for the Jung battle... They're firing point-defenses! They're targeting the escape pods, sir!"

"Shall I warn them?" Ensign Souza inquired urgently from the comm station.

"Do they have any other choice?" Nathan commented, controlling his frustration and rage. "Time to KKV launch?"

"Four minutes!" Mister Navashee replied as the bridge shook again, lurching slightly to port.

“Firing again!” Luis reported as the bridge again flashed red-orange from the departing plasma torpedoes.

“Target’s stern shields are down to twenty percent,” Mister Navashee added. “They’re firing missiles! Twenty seconds to impact!”

“Combat is targeting incoming missiles with point-defense lasers,” Luis reported.

“Four launched!” Mister Navashee added. “Two down! Three down! Four down! All missiles intercepted! Twenty seconds to shield barrier...” Mister Navashee paused, his eyes widening. “They’ve dropped... CAPTAIN! Target has extended her shields around Scout Three!”

Nathan jumped to his feet, a sense of panic washing over him like he had never felt before. “Target Scout Three and fire at will! All weapons! Fire everything!”

“Helm, one to port and two up angle!” Luis ordered. “Targeting plasma cannon! Firing!”

“One to port and two up, aye!” Mister Chiles replied.

“Battleship is firing grappling gear at Scout Three! I think they’ve got hold of her!”

“Firing all forward tubes!” Luis announced.

The bridge began flashing red-orange as plasma torpedoes began spewing forth from all tubes.

“They’re accelerating!” Mister Navashee reported.

“Helm! Stay with them!” Nathan ordered. “Tactical! Keep firing!”

“Target is swinging all guns and launchers aft,” Mister Navashee warned. “They mean to open fire on us with everything!”

Nathan felt hope draining away from his soul as the Jung battleship fled, their shields flashing with each plasma torpedo impact, but still not allowing their weapons to pass.

"Target is firing guns!" Mister Navashee announced.
"She's locking missiles on us as well!"

"Helm, two to port and two down!" Nathan ordered.
"Stand by escape jump, one hundred kilometers! Cease fire on the forward tubes and cannons, but keep trying to hit that Scout ship with our plasma cannon!"

"Aye, sir!" Luis replied, desperation obvious in his voice as well.

"Two to port, two down!" Mister Chiles acknowledged.

"One hundred kilometers, aye," Mister Riley followed.

"They're firing missiles!" Mister Navashee reported.
"Impact in ten seconds!"

"Jump line?" Nathan asked.

"Three seconds," Mister Riley reported.

"Five seconds!" Mister Navashee warned.

"Jump!"

"Jumping," Mister Riley replied as the jump flash washed over them again.

"Swing your nose around and get our tubes to bear on her," Nathan ordered. "Stand by all forward tubes and cannons. Snap shot as soon as possible!"

"Target is charging her FTL emitters!" Mister Navashee warned.

Nathan felt himself losing control. "Fire, Luis! Fire!"

"It's no good!" Luis replied. "Her forward shields are at full..."

"Target is going to FTL!" Mister Navashee reported.

"NO!" Nathan yelled. He watched the tactical display at the lower center of the main view screen as the icons representing the Jung battleship and Scout Three disappeared. "GODDAMN IT!" Nathan spun around to face aft. First he looked at Luis, wanting to blame him for not shooting fast enough. Then he turned to his right, looking at

Mister Navashee, but he had no one to look at but himself. He was in command. He had let the Jung get away with a jump drive.

He could feel his hands trembling as the adrenaline coursed through his veins. He could feel himself losing control. He felt as if he were about to fly apart in all directions, but something in him took over... held him together... brought back his focus. "Comms. Flash traffic for Scout One. Tell them to pursue and track the Jung battleship, but do not engage. Feed them the battleship's last course and speed at the moment she went to FTL."

"Aye, sir."

"Helm, come about and take us back to Kohara."

"Aye, sir." Mister Chiles acknowledged.

"Tactical, do you have Commander Telles's latest target list?"

"Negative, sir," Luis replied.

"Comms, get an updated target list from Commander Telles and feed it to tactical."

"Aye, sir."

"Update the commander as to the situation, and let him know that there will be no further Jung reinforcements headed for the surface." Nathan sat down in his chair. "As soon as Scout Two checks in, tell them to retrieve the KKV from the launch position and try to catch up with Scout One. I want them ready to strike if that battleship drops out of FTL for any reason."

"Understood," Ensign Souza replied.

Nathan stared at the main view screen, saying nothing further.

Mister Navashee exchanged glances with both Ensign Souza at the comm station, and Lieutenant Delaveaga at

tactical, then turned back to his console to continue with his duties.

Commander Telles entered the command post designated Mobile Two, Master Sergeant Jahal close behind. "Lieutenant," the commander said as he stepped into the darkened control room.

"Commander," the lieutenant began. "We are in touch with the Aurora now. She reports that the Jung battleship has departed the area, and that they will be ready to begin orbital strikes in a few minutes."

"Excellent, send them the updated target list."

"Yes, sir."

"Did they say how long the battleship will be gone?" Master Sergeant Jahal wondered.

"They indicated that it would not be returning."

"I figured they would simply slip away using conventional FTL, recharge their shields, and then return a short time later," the master sergeant said.

"Why are they not returning?" Commander Telles asked the lieutenant.

The lieutenant did not respond immediately, instead listening to the rest of the Aurora's message. His expression suddenly changed to one of grave concern. He looked at the commander. "Scout Three became disabled. The Jung battleship extended her shields and slipped away with the Scout ship in tow."

"What about their self-destruct systems?" the master sergeant asked. He looked at Commander Telles, who looked equally concerned. "Perhaps it is a trick? Perhaps they mean to delay detonation until an opportune moment, thus damaging the battleship enough that the Aurora can locate

her and finish the job?" He looked at the lieutenant, noting that his expression had not changed.

"Their self-destruct systems malfunctioned. The Scout ship's crew was in the process of ejecting, using their escape pods. The Jung destroyed them as they ejected. The Scout ship was captured intact."

"Shooting the crew as they ejected?" Master Sergeant Jahal exclaimed in disbelief. "Even the Ybaran Legions are not that callous."

"There is nothing callous about it," the commander explained. "The Jung probably feared that the escape pods were weapons, intent on damaging their shield generation systems and making them vulnerable to attack by the Aurora." Commander Telles sighed, leaning back against the planning table at the center of the control room. "I fear the situation has changed, and drastically so."

"We are Ghatazhak," the master sergeant said. "We shall continue to fight."

"Indeed," the commander agreed. "However, for the first time since becoming a Ghatazhak, I am not sure that I can complete my mission."

Several view screens began to light up as the Aurora began pounding Jung targets on the surface from orbit.

"Nonsense!" Master Sergeant Jahal replied. "Look at that fire power! This battle will soon be over, and once again we shall be victorious, just as we have been on every world, and just as we shall be on every world to come!"

Commander Telles looked at his friend. "I was not speaking of the battle," he said. "I was speaking of Captain Scott. I am not sure we will be able to protect him."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ghatazhak soldiers patrolled the grounds of House Ta'Akar in pairs. At strategic points about the compound, teams were busy erecting gun emplacements to defend against attacks from both the ground and the air. All about House Ta'Akar, the staff was preparing for what they hoped would never come.

Four flashes of blue-white light appeared not ten meters above the compound, revealing an equal number of armed Takaran jump shuttles.

Nearby gun crews jumped into action, swinging their weapons around to take aim at the shuttles hovering over them. Ghatazhak soldiers rushed into positions to open fire. Warning alarms sounded throughout the compound.

A Ghatazhak sergeant on the ground studied the hovering shuttles, taking note that they were neither firing nor landing. They were simply hovering overhead, taking no aggressive action. The sergeant moved further out into the open in order to get a better look at the shuttles. On the side of the nearest ship, he saw the crest of House Navarro, as well as the Avendahl's ship number. The shuttle rotated slowly, allowing the sergeant to see into the large side door. Standing in the doorway was a Ghatazhak lieutenant gazing back down at him. The Ghatazhak lieutenant made no gestures, just continued to stare down at the sergeant, as most lieutenants might do.

The sergeant tapped the comm-control on the side of his helmet, changing to the command frequency for House Ta'Akar. "Command, Sergeant Cislo. I have visual on the

shuttles. They are from the Avendahl, and are carrying Ghatazhak on board.”

“Affirmative,” the officer in the command center replied. “We are speaking with them now. They have properly authenticated and are cleared to land. Have the ranking officer among them report to Commander Erbe in the command center.”

“Understood,” the sergeant replied. “Cislo, out.” The sergeant looked up at the Ghatazhak lieutenant in the shuttle hovering nearest him and waved.

The shuttle moved forward, turning and descending into the clearing at the center of the compound, moving to one side to make room for the other three shuttles to land as well.

Sergeant Cislo walked toward the first shuttle as it touched down on the grass and its engines began to spin down. The lieutenant was the first one out of the shuttle, followed by nine more Ghatazhak soldiers.

“Lieutenant,” the sergeant called out as he approached, offering a salute. “You are to report to Commander Erbe in the command center. If you’ll follow...” The sergeant stopped mid-sentence, noticing something was wrong. There was something odd about the lieutenant’s expression. He glanced at the men behind him, noticing something else... They were not all the exact same size and proportions.

The sergeant raised his rifle to open fire, but was caught in the chest by not one, but three blasts of energy from several weapons. The impacts burned through his body armor and knocked him backward onto the ground. Still conscious, he reached for his sidearm as more energy bolts cut into his legs and abdomen.

He never got his sidearm out of its holster.

"Captain, multiple contacts over House Ta'Akar," Lieutenant Cahnis, the Avendahl's sensor officer announced. Another alarm sounded at one of the sensor stations, catching the lieutenant's attention. "Two more contacts, sir. Just out of FTL. Low orbit over Takara."

"Set action stations on all decks," Commander Golan ordered. "Call the captain to the bridge."

"Action stations, aye," an officer replied.

"Captain to the bridge," the communications officer called from the background.

"Identities on the contacts in orbit?" the commander asked.

"Cruisers, both," the sensor officer replied. "The Tontakeen and the Juda, sir."

"Shields coming up," Lieutenant Rogal announced from the weapons deck on the next level down and to the right of the commander. "Weapons coming online."

"Target both ships with our main guns, but do not paint them," the commander ordered.

"Aye, sir."

"What about the ships on the surface?" the commander asked.

"Uncertain," Lieutenant Cahnis replied. "I believe they were Toran-class combat jump shuttles, but as soon as they jumped in they started jamming our sensors. We currently cannot see any details within ten kilometers of House Ta'Akar."

"Alert our Ghatzhak platoons to be ready for immediate deployment to the surface," Commander Golan ordered.

"Aye, sir," Lieutenant Commander Getty replied. "However, I am not certain they are ready for action as of

yet."

"Captain on deck!" the guard barked from the entrance.

"Carry them to their shuttles if you have to," Captain Navarro said as he moved quickly from the entrance to the command platform at the center of the Avendahl's control center. "They can finish waking up on the way down."

"All decks report ready for action," the communications officer reported.

"Shields at full strength. Weapons charged and ready," Lieutenant Commander Rogal announced. "Mains are targeted onto the cruisers, but have not locked on as of yet."

"Four shuttles appeared over House Ta'Akar," Commander Golan began reporting as Captain Navarro stepped up onto the command platform. "They are believed to be Toran-class combat jump shuttles, but we were unable to confirm, as they immediately activated a sensor disruption field. Moments after, the Tontakeen and Juda jumped into low orbit over Takara, putting themselves between us and the planet."

"All things considered, I'd say it's a good bet that those shuttles are not of friendly intent," the captain said.

"Incoming transmission from the Tontakeen, Captain," the communications officer announced. "Captain Tenore is requesting to speak with you directly, Captain."

"Put him on my overhead," Captain Navarro ordered.

"Aye, sir," the communications officer replied.

The middle view screen built into the overhead display array encircling the command platform switched on, revealing the image of Captain Amose Tenore, of the Tontakeen.

"Suvan," Captain Tenore began, using as friendly a tone as possible. "It has been too long, my old friend."

"Friends do not fire on one another," Captain Navarro replied, "as you did yesterday."

"A misunderstanding, I am..."

"I'll make this easy for you, Amose," Captain Navarro said, cutting the Tontakeen's captain off mid-sentence. "Lower your shields and power down your weapons, then recall your shuttles from the surface. If you do so immediately, I am *willing* to consider this a misunderstanding, as you suggested. Fail to comply, and I shall destroy you and all who stand with you."

"Suvan..."

Captain Navarro held up his hand, again cutting Captain Tenore off before he could speak. "This will be your only warning. You have thirty seconds to comply." Captain Navarro signaled his communications officer to cut the connection, causing Captain Tenore's image to disappear, replaced by the tactical display a moment later. "Lock all weapons on the Tontakeen and the Juda and prepare to fire."

"Locking all weapons on the Tontakeen and the Juda," Lieutenant Rogal acknowledged.

Captain Navarro looked at his executive officer. "Tenore will not comply." He turned to his flight control officer. "Launch all Ghatazhak shuttles to reinforce House Ta'Akar. Have them launch to port and jump past Pitora, come around the moon, and then jump to Takara. That way they cannot be targeted during launch."

"Aye, sir," the lieutenant commander acknowledged.

"Has either ship replied?" the captain asked his communications officer.

"Negative, sir."

Captain Navarro looked at Lieutenant Cahnis.

The lieutenant glanced back over his shoulder at the main sensor status display. "No change, sir."

"Commence firing, all weapons," Captain Navarro ordered calmly.

"Firing main batteries," Lieutenant Rogal replied.

Captain Navarro looked at his XO again. "And so begins Takara's first civil war."

"It began three weeks ago," Commander Golan reminded the captain, "when that pig Dahra sent in Ybaran dogs to do his dirty work."

"But I thought the Ghatazhak were on our side?" Yanni asked as he followed Casimir and Deliza quickly down the main corridor.

"These are not Ghatazhak," Casimir explained, "at least not in the true sense."

"What does that mean?"

"The men attacking are of the Ybaran Legions," Deliza explained.

"I thought Ybara was a moon in your system?"

"It is. It's one of the many transformed worlds of Takara. Long ago, Caius enslaved Ybara and marginalized their people. He forced their men to serve as Ghatazhak, in order to greatly increase their numbers to defend against the Karuzari attacks against his empire."

"But I thought the Ghatazhak were programmed to be..."

"They are, but the programming does not work as well on Ybarans, due to their overly aggressive nature."

"My lord!" Major Bellen yelled, looking up and to their left.

A massive stained glass window stretching across the ceiling of the main foyer burst into pieces that rained down

into the foyer next to Casimir and the others. In pairs, Ybaran Legion soldiers fell from a shuttle hovering above the broken window, their Ghatazhak combat suits tensing up around their knees and hips to absorb the energy of their landings.

Major Bellen and his men immediately opened fire, killing three of the intruders.

"Main foyer!" Major Bellen called over his comm-set. "Ten or more!" He drew his sidearm and tossed it to Casimir. "Go!" he ordered as he continued firing with his energy rifle.

The security officer next to him took an energy bolt in the chest, spinning him around and sending him to the floor, as Casimir, Deliza, and Yanni ran behind them to the safety of the other side of the intersection. Two more Ybarans fell as well, as well as two of the major's men.

Major Bellen grabbed another energy rifle dropped by one of his dead officers and fired with both weapons. After several seconds, he stopped firing and ran to the other side of the intersection, pursuing Casimir and the others as they dashed down the corridor. "Up the stairs!" he ordered. "We can fire on them from above!" He stopped for a moment and spun around, firing both weapons in wild fashion, sweeping back and forth across the intersection behind them in an attempt to keep the Ybaran soldiers at a distance. "Moving upstairs!" the major called over his comms, and he turned and ran up the stairs.

"Any word from House Ta'Akar?" Commander Golan asked the Avendahl's communications officer.

"Negative, sir," the officer replied. "We lost all contact with their security forces, as well as Commander Erbe's

platoon, as soon as the sensor disruption field became active."

"Shield section twenty-eight is down to eighty percent," Lieutenant Rogal reported.

"Roll our starboard side away from direct fire until the section recharges," Captain Navarro ordered.

"Rolling twenty degrees to port," the helmsman replied.

"All weapons tracking with the roll," Lieutenant Rogal added.

"Captain, I'm reading a fluctuation in the Tontakeen's number six dorsal shield," Lieutenant Cahnis reported, "just forward of her number three missile battery."

"Captain," Commander Golan said, "I had drinks with several officers from the Tontakeen a few weeks ago. Her chief engineer was complaining about that very same shield generator. He was angry that the Tontakeen's financial controller had not been willing to acquisition a new one."

"Lieutenant Rogal, vary your targeting on the Tontakeen," Captain Navarro ordered, taking the XO's comments into consideration. "Every third to fifth shot should be at that shield segment."

"Aye, sir," Lieutenant Rogal acknowledged.

"Keep an eye out, Mister Cahnis," the captain added. "If the fluctuations become worse, let us know."

"Aye, sir," the sensor officer replied.

"How long until our reinforcements reach them?" Captain Navarro wondered.

"At least five minutes," Lieutenant Commander Getty replied.

"Four Toran-class shuttles, ten men each," Commander Golan observed. "Commander Erbe will have his hands full for the next five minutes."

"It was a mistake not to revive all the Ghatazhak three weeks ago," Captain Navarro said.

"Captain," Lieutenant Cahnis interrupted, "both targets are launching troop shuttles and fighter escorts."

"Launch interceptors," Captain Navarro ordered. "Send them straight to the skies above House Ta'Akar. Those shuttles will have jumped to the surface by the time our interceptors are out of their tubes."

"They'll get at least half of those troops on the ground before our interceptors get anywhere near them," Commander Golan told the captain.

"If Casimir had only taken a more aggressive posture weeks ago, when I first recommended he do so," the captain said, shaking his head subtly. "We could have had round-the-clock combat air patrols over the skies of Answari, and a ring of Ghatazhak around his property."

"That's what Caius would have done," Commander Golan commented.

"Caius would have arrested all the nobles and executed them on the spot, turning their houses over to any of their heirs who were willing to pledge their loyalty to him." Captain Navarro sighed. "Casimir could use a few of his brother's character flaws about now."

"The Tontakeen is locking her number one missile battery onto us," Lieutenant Cahnis reported. "They're targeting our main propulsion."

"Aft shield strength?" Captain Navarro inquired calmly.

"All aft shields are at one hundred percent," Lieutenant Rogal replied.

"They'll never make it through our shields," Commander Golan said.

"No, they won't," the captain agreed. "But they can keep our point-defense otherwise occupied while they send

gunships to jump within our shields and take out shield emitters. It seems our dear friend Captain Tenore is upping the ante.” Captain Navarro turned toward his weapons officer. “Retarget all main guns onto the Tontakeen’s number six dorsal shield, and fire them all simultaneously.”

“Retargeting all main guns, aye,” Lieutenant Rogal replied.

“Prepare a missile barrage for the Tontakeen as well. Twelve missiles, full yields,” the captain added.

“Aye, sir.”

“A bit much, don’t you think?” Commander Golan suggested.

“Perhaps,” Captain Navarro admitted, “but it never hurts to send a strong message. I wouldn’t want anymore ‘misunderstandings’ between us.”

“All main batteries locked on the Tontakeen’s number six dorsal shield,” Lieutenant Rogal announced.

“Fire all batteries, single round.”

“Firing a single round on all batteries,” the lieutenant replied.

Captain Navarro waited several seconds before issuing another order. “Fire your missiles, Lieutenant.”

“Firing missiles.”

“Retarget all main batteries onto the Juda and resume firing,” Captain Navarro ordered.

“Missile impacts in one minute,” Lieutenant Cahnis reported.

“Retargeting all weapons to the Juda,” Lieutenant Rogal acknowledged.

“Tontakeen’s number six dorsal shield has collapsed, Captain,” Lieutenant Cahnis reported. “She’s firing point-defenses.”

"Lieutenant Rogal, one gun on the Tontakeen's port point-defense array, if you will."

"Targeting the Tontakeen's port point-defense array," the lieutenant replied.

"You're just toying with him," Commander Golan realized.

"A cruiser, against a capital ship?" Captain Navarro replied. "Of course I'm toying with him, Commander. I never much cared for House Tenore, myself."

"Starboard ventral gun locked onto the Tontakeen's port point-defense array," Lieutenant Rogal announced.

"Open fire."

"Firing."

"Long-range cameras on the Tontakeen, maximum magnification. On my screen," Captain Navarro ordered. The center view screen in his overhead display array switched from the tactical display to the view from one of the Avendahl's long-range cameras. A stream of energy bolts from the Avendahl's starboard ventral plasma turret pounded the Tontakeen's point-defense array, blowing it to pieces as it plowed into her armored hull.

"Tontakeen's port point-defense array is down," Lieutenant Cahnis announced. "Four missiles still inbound to target. Impact in twenty seconds."

"Cease fire, Lieutenant," Captain Navarro directed. "Retarget back to the Juda and continue firing."

"Aye, sir."

"Impact in five seconds."

Captain Navarro watched the center view screen as their missiles struck the Tontakeen, detonating in brilliant white flashes of light. After a few seconds, the light faded, revealing only portions of the Tontakeen floating harmlessly in space.

Captain Navarro sighed.

"A thousand men just died on that ship," Commander Golan commented soberly. "Takaran men."

"Men who chose to serve House Tenore," Captain Navarro added. "Men betrayed by a leader who decided his own wealth and power were more important than the lives of those who volunteered to serve under him." He turned to look at Commander Golan. "Let us not lose sight of that fact, Commander." The captain turned toward his communications officer. "Get me the Juda's captain."

"Aye, sir."

Captain Navarro turned back toward his XO. "I will offer the Juda's crew a chance to live. Let us hope Captain Walkly has more brains than Captain Tenore."

Major Bellen bounded up the stairs, two steps at a time. At the top of the first flight, he turned briefly and sprayed the staircase behind him with both rifles, sending a shower of energy bolts into the pursuing Ybarans, before continuing up the next flight.

"Rain on them!" he demanded as he came up the last flight.

Casimir and two of the major's men leaned over the rail and opened up on the flight below, striking their Ybaran attackers in the heads and shoulders, but their armor was of Ghatazhak design, and quite effective. A few men fell as energy weapons fire found the nooks and grooves that exist in all body armor, while others were forced to turn back after multiple strikes heated up their armor to intolerable levels. However, their numbers were too great to be held off by only five guns.

Within seconds, the amount of enemy fire flying up at them from below was too much, and they were forced to fall back from the railing and seek safety further down the corridor.

Major Bellen and his men continued firing downward over the railing for a few more seconds, allowing Casimir, Deliza, and Yanni enough time to get partway down the corridor. "Fall back!" the major yelled. He turned and headed down the corridor, as did one of his men. The third man tried to continue firing a bit too long, and took an energy bolt in the face, killing him instantly and sending him toppling backwards.

Major Bellen did not turn and look at the fallen man. He recognized the sound and smell of burning flesh. It was a very different sound when an energy bolt found a soft, human target.

No longer encumbered by enemy fire, the Ybaran Legion soldiers came charging up the stairs in pairs, moving quickly down the corridor after reaching the top.

Major Bellen stood in a doorway on one side of the intersection, looking across at his man standing on the other side, both of them out of view of the approaching Ybarans. The major listened, trying to make out the footsteps of the enemy as they advanced down the corridor in cautious yet expeditious fashion.

Finally, the major pointed one of his weapons around the corner and opened fire, without sticking his body out in the open. His man on the opposite side did the same, sweeping the corridor with bolts of energy.

Although several Ybarans fell to the enemy fire, some had anticipated the attack, and quickly dropped to the floor to avoid the initial attack. They immediately opened up, concentrating on the edges of the intersection, forcing their

attackers to withdraw lest they risk losing both their weapon and their hands to Ybaran fire.

Major Bellen began backing away from the corner as quickly as possible, both rifles still aimed at the intersection from which he withdrew, knowing that at any moment, the Ybarans would come charging around the corner, weapons blazing. He could see his last man escaping around the far corner at the other end of the hallway, on the opposite side of the intersection, following the same route that Casimir and the others had taken only moments ago.

The Ybarans did not disappoint. They came charging around the corner, throwing themselves willingly into the major's energy bolts. Despite all he knew about the Ybarans' aggressive nature, their willingness to die in battle never ceased to amaze him.

His first few shots struck true, finding weaknesses in the Ybaran armor that could only be taken advantage of at such close range. Three soldiers immediately fell, leaving a clear shot into the backs of two others who were chasing after his man on the other side of the intersection. They too fell, as his precise fire found the gap between the bottom of the Ybarans' helmets and the tops of their field packs.

They were the last Ybarans that the major would ever kill. No less than six energy bolts found Major Bellen's face, chest, left arm, and abdomen. One moment, he was fighting bravely, the next he was on the floor, staring up at the ceiling in agonizing pain as he fought to draw breath. He felt the Ybarans rip his rifles from his hands. He could hear them pass him by and continue down the corridor, no doubt looking for the very souls the major would die to protect. In a moment, he had gone from being the Ybarans' number one priority, to being a mound of smoldering flesh on the

battlefield. Ybarans enjoyed leaving enemy combatants to suffer a slow lingering death.

As he gasped for air, the major heard more weapons fire, but not from the direction he had expected. The exchange became even more ferocious than before, and he could hear the sound of Ybaran soldiers falling to the floor. He could hear the satisfying sounds of Ybarans screaming in the same agony that he felt, but was unable to express.

Then the sounds ceased.

There was a rustle of boots, swift and sure. No rattle of chaos, just smooth and practiced motions. The major could feel himself slipping away, his peripheral vision fading. Then a face... someone familiar.

"Major," the voice called. "Where did they go?"

Major Bellen summoned all his strength to move just his eyes... just enough to see Commander Erbe.

"Casimir and the others," the commander said. "We must find them."

Major Bellen muttered as best he could. "Balcony... library." After that, his vision faded, leaving only his hearing, distant and faint as it was.

"You fought bravely, today, Major," the commander said, "with honor and..."

"You have already lost, you just have yet to realize it," Captain Walkly said over the vid-link to the Avendahl's captain.

"I dispatched Tontakeen with ease," Captain Navarro replied with smug confidence, "I had hoped that you would be wiser than the late Captain Tenore. I can see now that I was mistaken."

"Your only mistake was in choosing to back Casimir Ta'Akar," Captain Walkly stated before ending the transmission.

"Another fool," Captain Navarro mumbled. "Weapons, target the Juda, all guns. Let's end this now."

"Targeting all guns to the Juda," Lieutenant Rogal acknowledged.

"The Juda's chief engineer was not present that evening," Commander Golan mused. "The Juda may be more challenging to destroy."

"Captain!" Lieutenant Cahnis interrupted. "New contacts! Coming out of the Pallax shipyards! It's the Crippin and the Astaire!"

"How long until they are clear of their bays?" the captain asked urgently.

"Two minutes," the lieutenant replied.

"Weapons, cancel last," Captain Navarro ordered. "Helm, put us in their path, ten kilometers out. Communications, prepare a broadcast on all Takaran fleet channels."

"Changing course now," the helmsman replied. "Jump to intercept in ninety seconds."

"Broadcast ready, sir," the communications officer replied.

"Open channel," the captain ordered. "Crippin and Astaire, stand down immediately or be destroyed. You have one minute to comply." Captain Navarro gestured to end the transmission. "How long until they receive?"

"Forty seconds, sir," the communications officer replied.

"Close enough," Commander Golan commented.

"Weapons, anticipate your angles," the captain ordered. "I want our guns firing seconds after we complete the intercept jump. Be ready for a starboard standard combat turn as we fire."

"Twenty seconds to jump point," the jump master announced.

"Load ship-to-ship missiles, set for short range, full yields."

"They cannot raise shields until they are clear from their ports," Commander Golan realized, a sinister smile on his face.

"They could, but they would damage the port's proximity sensors. Those ports are the property of House Seto, and I'm betting that Captain Seto will not want to damage his father's prize possession."

"Ten seconds to jump."

"Captain Yoo may not be as considerate," the commander warned.

"Jumping in three..."

"One can hope," Captain Navarro replied.

"...One.....jump."

"Targets dead ahead, ten kilometers," Lieutenant Cahnis reported.

"Open fire, both targets," Captain Navarro ordered.

"Astaire is raising shields," the lieutenant added.

"Firing guns!" Lieutenant Rogal announced. "Locking missiles on targets."

"Astaire is charging her jump emitters!" Lieutenant Cahnis warned.

"She's not even out of port yet!" Commander Golan exclaimed. "I thought their jump drives were not yet ready?"

"Ready, but not tested," Captain Navarro corrected.

"Firing missiles!"

"A daring fellow," Captain Navarro continued. "Show me the Crippin."

The center view screen in the display array overhead switched to the camera tracking the Crippin. Rail gun fire

slammed into her hull, sending fragments out in all directions.

"Astaire is jumping away!" the lieutenant added. "Missile impacts with the Crippin in three.....two.....one....."

The view screen became white as multiple warheads detonated on impact.

"Direct hits!" the lieutenant reported. "Assessing damage."

"Continue your turn," the captain ordered. "Bring us back around to return to Takara."

"Multiple hull breaches, loss of life support on several decks," Lieutenant Cahnis reported. "Two of her reactors are offline, including her ZPED. She can still maneuver, but she's not going to be jumping anywhere, or offering up much of a fight."

"Cease fire," Captain Navarro ordered. "I believe Seto has learned his lesson. Now, let's go offer some instruction to Captain Walkly."

Commander Erbe and his men moved quickly down the hallway of the upper floor of House Ta'Akar. As they passed each doorway, two men would enter the room and check for occupants, friend or foe. Behind them, they could hear the exchange of weapons fire as the Ghatazhak element guarding the stairwell tried to keep the next wave of Ybarans from ascending, thus buying Commander Erbe and his team the time they needed to locate and secure Casimir and Deliza Ta'Akar.

"These Ybarans are like rabid pahkta!" the sergeant called over the commander's helmet comms. *"We cannot hold this position for long, there are too many of them!"*

"Orin, Erbe," the commander called over his comms. "Status?"

"We've made it to the northeast corner of the main house!" Sergeant Orin replied. *"Lost eight men getting here, though. Where would you like us?"*

"Work your way around to the service entrance on the north side," Commander Erbe ordered. "Enter through the kitchen and pinch them in crossfire in the south main stairway. Then blow both the main stairways."

"Understood."

"Dumont, Erbe. Orin will take them from below. Pinch them in a crossfire. Mow them down. Orin will blow both stairways so no one can reach the second level."

"Yes, sir!" the sergeant acknowledged.

Commander Erbe reached the library door, taking position on one side with his back against the wall. Two more men took up position on the other side, while a third man stepped up and kicked the door in, immediately stepping to his right to avoid fire.

A dozen bolts of energy came flying out through the open library doorway, striking the opposite wall and sending bits and pieces of debris everywhere, while setting the wall paper on fire.

"This is Commander Erbe of the Ghatazhak!" the commander yelled from beside the open doorway. "Hold your fire! Hold your fire!"

"Show yourselves!" Casimir hollered from inside the library.

Commander Erbe stepped slowly into the doorway, his weapon still held high and ready to fire. His movements were well practiced and precise, with no wasted efforts. As soon as he saw Casimir and the security officer, he lowered his weapon and entered the room. "Sire, we must get you

and your people to safety. The grounds are crawling with Ybaran Legion troops. They surround the compound and invade your lands as we speak.” The commander moved across the room, swinging the balcony doors open. As he stepped out onto the balcony, several bolts of energy slammed into the door frame above, and the walls to either side of him. The commander did not flinch, instead raising his weapon and returning fire with pinpoint accuracy, dropping three of the four shooters with three single shots from his energy rifle.

“The Ybarans are lousy shots,” the commander said as he returned to the library from the balcony, “but they *are* everywhere. If we try to reach the ground from here, one of them is bound to get lucky.”

“We can’t go back down the stairs,” the security guard said.

“No, we cannot. They are filled with Ybarans. My men are trying to hold them at bay, but they have orders to blow the stairs on both sides of the foyer.”

“How will we get down?” Yanni wondered.

“The roof?” Deliza realized.

“Indeed,” Commander Erbe agreed.

“Or we can stay, and fight,” Casimir suggested.

“Normally, as a Ghatazhak, I would agree with you,” the commander said. “However, the attack is not against your property, sire. It is against you and your family. The nobles want control, and the only way they can forever be guaranteed that control is through your deaths. The prevention of *that* is what my men and I are fighting for, this day.”

“I thought you had several platoons,” Casimir argued, “awakened from the storage array...”

"Six hundred men added to my own, for a total of eight hundred," the commander said, "against untold thousands of Ybarans."

"There cannot be more than a thousand out there," Casimir insisted. "Surely your men can take them?"

"*Now* there are only a thousand," Commander Erbe replied, "but there are thousands more still on Ybara. Thousands of trained soldiers who are barely surviving on a world that was marginalized by your brother. Those are the men who the nobles will use to defeat you. If we stand and fight, here and now, those men will surely come by the thousands, and this conflict will escalate into a full-blown civil war, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands if not more."

"But the Avendahl..." Casimir began.

"There are other ways to win a war, besides standing toe-to-toe and slugging it out."

"Unusual words from a Ghatazhak," Casimir said.

"These are unusual times," the commander replied.

"The roof is covered with machinery and communications gear," Casimir warned. "There is no place for a shuttle to land..."

"They do not need to land," the commander insisted, "they only need to hover low enough for you to get on board."

"Transition complete," the jump master announced.

"Contact," Lieutenant Cahnis reported. "The Juda. She's launching another wave of assault ships. Troop shuttles, gunships, and fighter escorts. Thirty-six ships in total."

"Helm, make course directly for the Juda," Captain Navarro ordered.

"Aye, sir."

"The Juda is targeting us again," Lieutenant Cahnis reported. "She's locking guns and missiles."

"Return the favor, Mister Rogal," the captain ordered.

"Targeting all guns and missiles on the Juda," the lieutenant acknowledged.

"The Juda is firing," Lieutenant Cahnis warned.

"Main guns are locked on the Juda," the weapons officer announced.

"Fire at will."

"Firing mains," the lieutenant replied.

"Missile launch," Lieutenant Cahnis announced. "Eight inbound missiles. Forty seconds to impact."

"All missile batteries," the captain ordered. "Let us end this quickly."

"Locking all missile batteries on the Juda."

"Incoming message from Commander Erbe," the communications officer interrupted. "He's asking for more combat jumpers and fighters to provide cover during extraction."

"Flight?" the captain called.

"I can vector six fighters and two more combat jumpers," Lieutenant Commander Getty replied. "ETA; two minutes."

"Do it," the captain replied.

"Aye, sir."

"I have missile locks on the Juda, Captain," Lieutenant Rogal reported. "All batteries."

"Full yields, all batteries, wide dispersal pattern," Captain Navarro instructed. "Launch when ready."

"Full yields, wide dispersal, all batteries... Launching missiles."

"Reload same and launch a second wave on my mark," Captain Navarro ordered. "Batteries two and four, high arc."

Batteries one and three, same arc, but either side of target. Batteries five and six delayed, straight on. Prep and hold."

"All incoming missiles have been intercepted," Lieutenant Cahnis reported. "Juda is launching a second wave. She's turning toward us."

"She's giving us a smaller targeting profile," Commander Golan commented, "trying to make herself harder to hit. She'll put all her power into her forward shields to try and compensate for our increased firepower."

"But she'll also be reducing the number of guns she can put on us," Captain Navarro pointed out, "which is a grave error on her captain's part." The captain turned toward his weapons officer. "Fire next wave of missiles, Lieutenant."

"Firing missile batteries one through four," the weapons officer replied.

"Reload one through four with same."

"Juda has destroyed the first wave of missiles," Lieutenant Cahnis reported.

"Firing missile batteries five and six," Lieutenant Rogal announced. "Reload them as well, sir?"

"Indeed," the captain replied. "Helm, kill the mains, turn us to port and show the Juda our starboard side. Divert all shield power to the starboard shields. Put all our starboard guns on her and fire."

"Six of our missiles have gotten through the Juda's point-defenses!" Lieutenant Cahnis exclaimed. "Direct impacts with her shields. Her forward shields are down to eighty percent!"

"Another round of missiles, Mister Rogal."

"Firing next wave. Firing all starboard guns," the lieutenant replied.

"Jump event! New contact!" Lieutenant Cahnis announced. "The Astaire! Position one seven four by two

four two. Range; two thousand kilometers!"

"Two thousand?" Commander Golan wondered.

"Their jump drive is untested," Captain Navarro replied, "Yoo is unwilling to jump in close."

"The Astaire is locking onto us with missiles," Lieutenant Cahnis reported.

"Jump master, prepare an escape jump," the captain ordered. "Ten-kilometer micro-jump, if you please. Wait for my order."

"Micro-jump of ten kilometers," the jump master replied. "We'll be ready, sir."

"Three more of our missiles have made it past the Juda's point-defenses."

"Another round, Lieutenant. This time, lessen the arc on batteries one through four, so that they come in between the previous launch tracks."

"Aye, sir."

"You're leaving her nowhere to FTL safely," Commander Golan realized.

"The Astaire is launching missiles," Lieutenant Cahnis announced. "Time to impact, two minutes. The Juda just took three more hits. Her forward shields are down to forty percent!"

"Targeting the Astaire's missiles with our point-defenses," Lieutenant Rogal reported.

"Negative," Captain Navarro replied. "Do not target the Astaire's missiles."

"Aye, sir," the lieutenant replied. "Captain, I must remind you that our port shields are currently down."

"Thank you for the reminder, Lieutenant," Captain Navarro replied.

Commander Golan looked at the captain, a smile creeping onto his face. "Instruction indeed."

"A crossfire is a double-edged sword," Captain Navarro replied.

"Starboard shields down to eighty percent."

"Surely, Yoo is not that short-sighted," the commander insisted.

"Some captains see the jump drive as merely a way to get from point A to point B more quickly," Captain Navarro explained. "They fail to realize that it is as potent a weapon as any plasma cannon or nuclear warhead, when used properly."

"The Astaire's weapons officer will simply detonate the missiles after we jump," the commander insisted.

"I'm counting on it," the captain replied. "Is the Juda still closing on us, Lieutenant?"

"Aye, sir," the lieutenant warned. "Fifteen kilometers and closing. One minute until the Astaire's missiles reach us," Lieutenant Cahnis warned. "The Astaire is launching another round of missiles."

"Starboard shields down to seventy percent!"

"Shall I launch another wave of missiles?" Lieutenant Rogal inquired.

"Negative," Captain Navarro replied. "Shut down the missile batteries, but leave them deployed."

"Aye, sir," the lieutenant replied.

"Feigning a power failure?" Commander Golan asked. "Any first-year cadet would spot that move, Captain."

"Probably, but it does give them one more thing to think about."

"Thirty seconds to missile impact," Lieutenant Cahnis reported. "Juda's forward shields are down to twenty percent. She's currently boxed in and cannot jump."

"Weapons, bring two of our main guns onto the Astaire and fire when ready," Captain Navarro ordered.

"Retargeting fore and aft gun batteries on the Astaire," Lieutenant Rogal reported.

"Starboard shields down to fifty percent and falling," the systems officer warned.

"Range to Juda?" the captain asked again.

"Seven kilometers," Lieutenant Cahnis replied. "Twenty seconds to missile impact."

"Stand by on that escape jump," Captain Navarro reminded.

"Escape jump standing by."

"Juda's forward shields down to ten percent!"

"Ten seconds to impact!"

"All our missiles inbound for the Juda have been destroyed," Lieutenant Cahnis reported.

"Five seconds to impact!"

"Range to Juda?" Captain Navarro inquired.

"Three kilometers, sir!" the lieutenant replied, trying unsuccessfully to hide his concerns.

"Escape jump," the captain ordered, "...now."

"Jumping," the jump control officer replied.

"Weapons, power up missile launchers and target the Juda's new position based on our new position," Captain Navarro ordered. "Bring all guns onto her as well. Fire when ready."

"Transition complete!" the jump control officer reported.

"Powering up the missile launchers!"

"Multiple detonations!" Lieutenant Cahnis exclaimed. "The Astaire is detonating her missiles mid-flight to avoid striking the Juda!"

"Main guns retargeted, firing!" the weapons officer reported.

"Captain!" Lieutenant Cahnis interrupted. "The radiation from the close-in detonations... I think they're blinding the

Juda's sensors!"

"Blinding our targeting sensors as well," Commander Golan commented under his breath.

"Yes, but we know how far we moved," the captain said. "They do not."

"Missile batteries locked on the Juda's estimated position, based on last known course and speed," Lieutenant Rogal announced. "Ready to fire!"

"Fire all missiles," Captain Navarro ordered.

"Firing all missiles!" Lieutenant Rogal acknowledged.

"They won't even see them coming," Commander Golan realized.

"Neither will their point-defenses," Captain Navarro replied.

"Five seconds to impact!" Lieutenant Cahnis exclaimed.

"Targeting cameras, my screen," the captain ordered.

The image on the center view screen in the overhead display array switched, revealing a half dozen fading flashes of white light from the detonation of the Astaire's failed missiles. As they faded away, they were replaced by more than two dozen flashes of light of equal brilliance, followed by the yellow and orange flashes of secondary explosions within the Juda's hull.

"Target destroyed!" Lieutenant Cahnis reported with excitement.

"Helm, twenty to port, and four up relative. Prepare a new jump, one light minute."

"Twenty to port and four up, aye."

"Preparing a jump of one light minute."

"Communications, transmit message to extrication shuttles. Rendezvous will be at point seven one five."

"Aye, sir."

“Weapons, prepare another round of missiles,” Captain Navarro added, “in case Captain Yoo wishes to continue this dance.”

Two Ghatazhak soldiers burst through the service door out onto the roof of House Ta’Akar. Within seconds, incoming fire from three different positions higher than the rooftop came raining down upon them, killing one of the soldiers in the first volley.

“Snipers!” the second soldier warned as he ducked for cover behind one of the many pieces of machinery on the roof.

Commander Erbe stood just inside the doorway, safe from sniper fire, as two more of his men ran out across the roof to take up firing positions. “Erbe to any combat jumper! We’ve got snipers to the east, west, and north of the main building! Request assistance!”

“Erbe, Jumper One Three. On you in twenty seconds. Can you direct fire to the targets to help us find them?”

“Jumper One Three, Erbe. Affirmative. Follow our fire from the rooftop to the targets.”

“Erbe, Jumper One Three, copy.”

“Put fire on those snipers and don’t stop!” Commander Erbe yelled to his troops out on the rooftop.

All three Ghatazhak soldiers began to open up on the distant buildings where the snipers were positioned, creating bright red lines of energy weapons fire for Jumper One Three to follow.

“Erbe, One Three, targets in sight,” the pilot reported.

“Erbe, Jumper Two Eight, one minute out.”

“Copy, Two Eight. Roof is hot,” the commander replied.

“Two Eight copies, pickup is hot.”

Commander Erbe turned to look at Casimir, Deliza, and Yanni. "Our jumper will be here in one minute!" he yelled above the sound of weapons fire. "We will need to move quickly once he arrives! The longer he is in a hover, the more time the Ybarans have to take him out!"

Jumper One Three streaked overhead, barely missing the various communications antennas on the roof of House Ta'Akar. The shuttle made a circle to the left, its weapons turrets firing at the same targets as the Ghatazhak soldiers on the roof. The shuttles, however, had far more firepower, which they used to tear the buildings apart, no doubt killing any Ybaran sniper who might have been positioned there.

A flash of blue-white light appeared just overhead, and another jump shuttle appeared. Jumper One Three pivoted to the right as they continued to fire, taking out the last sniper position.

"Erbe, Two Eight, overhead. Take out those antennas so we can get lower!"

Commander Erbe raised his rifle and fired at the base of three of the largest antennas nearby, causing them to collapse onto the roof. "Two Eight, you're clear to descend. Advise caution! The roof is not rated for your weight!"

"Copy. Two Eight will maintain a hover. Watch our jet wash. Approach from midship, starboard side!"

"Understood!" Commander Erbe replied as he watched the jump shuttle descend from above. He peeked out of the doorway, looking to his left at the burning holes in the side of the distant building where an Ybaran sniper had once been. House Ta'Akar was located in a more suburban area of Answari. Had they been in the family's downtown compound at the time of the attack, there would have been far more positions available for enemy snipers. As it was, there were only three of them within reasonable range. "Keep an eye

on those buildings!” he instructed his men over his helmet comms. “All ground units, max fire, now!”

All around the Ta’Akar compound, Ghatazhak soldiers increased their fire rate, spraying every known enemy position with as much firepower as possible in the hope of keeping the enemy at bay long enough for Jumper Two Eight to complete the extrication.

The jump shuttle descended even lower, their underside only half a meter above the rooftop.

Commander Erbe signaled the two men behind him, who immediately moved past him and out onto the roof. The commander turned to Casimir. “You run straight out and jump in!”

“Deliza and Yanni go first!” Casimir insisted.

“*Two Eight, in position!*” the pilot reported.

“Sir! We do not...”

“They go first!” Casimir repeated. He turned and grabbed Deliza. “Go! Run to the shuttle and jump in! Do not look back!”

“What about you?” Deliza wondered.

Casimir could see the fear in his daughter’s eyes. “I will be right behind you, I promise.” He looked at Yanni, then back at Deliza. “Go!”

“Coming out!” Commander Erbe called over his helmet comms.

The Ghatazhak on the roof increased their rate of fire, alternating between the different distant buildings where snipers could still be positioned.

Deliza ran out across the roof, dodging between the environmental machinery. When she reached the hovering jump shuttle, two men inside reached out and grabbed her arms, pulling her up into the ship.

Commander Erbe turned to Casimir.

"Yanni is next," Casimir ordered, leaving the commander with no room to argue. Casimir turned to Yanni. "Go! Quickly!"

Yanni dashed out through the doorway, nearly stumbling as he stepped out onto the roof. Two shots from the building to the east slammed into the roof just behind him as he ran toward the hovering shuttle, tearing up the roof and sending debris flying.

The Ghatazhak soldiers on the roof stood up from behind their cover and focused their fire on the building to the east, showering its sides with energy bolts.

Yanni jumped up toward the hovering jump shuttle and was caught by the crewman in the open hatchway, who pulled him inside.

"Fast movers to the west!" the copilot of the jump shuttle called over the comms. *"We gotta go! We gotta go!"*

"Highball Five Two, moving to intercept," another pilot called. *"ETA, thirty seconds."*

"Everyone on board, now!" the copilot urged.

"Go!" Commander Erbe ordered Casimir. "Everyone on the roof, to the shuttle, now!"

Casimir ran past the commander out onto the rooftop as the four Ghatazhak soldiers began to walk backward toward him and the hovering jump shuttle.

Commander Erbe came out of the doorway behind Casimir, just as a blue-white flash of light appeared directly overhead.

A thunderous sound and a wave of air knocked Casimir to his belly. The shock wave scrambled his senses for a moment, making his ears hurt and his eyes water.

"They're right on top of us!" the copilot exclaimed over the comms. *"Roll to port and climb!"*

The jump shuttle's engine went to full power as it rolled slightly left and began to climb.

"Wait!" Deliza screamed from the back of the shuttle.

Commander Erbe dropped on top of Casimir, shielding him from the thrust wash of the climbing shuttle with his body, as his men swung their weapons upward and opened fire on the enemy jump shuttle that had just jumped in above them.

Four men fell from the hovering jump ship onto the roof, opening fire as they landed. The nearest Ghatazhak soldier was the first to fall, taking energy blasts in the chest and head. The other three began firing at the four Ybarans as four more fell to the roof behind them.

Commander Erbe rolled off of Casimir and opened fire on the second four Ybarans, cutting them down with ease. "Back inside!" he yelled at Casimir, as two of the Ybarans charged toward them.

Casimir scrambled to his feet, but did not heed the commander's recommendations. Instead, he pulled the commander's sidearm from his thigh holster, and in a fluid motion activated its power cell, deactivated its safety, and opened fire on the charging men. Three shots leapt from his weapon, the first two striking the nearest Ybaran in the chest and knocking him over, the third one finding the other man's face shield. Neither Ybaran was mortally wounded, rather the first one was scrambling to get back to his feet, and the second trying to regain his senses.

Commander Erbe took advantage of the second man's dazed state, drawing his knife and inserting it forcefully between the bottom edge of the Ybaran's helmet and the top of his chest armor, piercing his trachea.

Casimir fired two shots into the unprotected groin area of the first Ybaran, walking three more shots up his torso until

a fourth shot found the underside of the soldier's chin.

Commander Erbe turned and saw Jumper Two Eight as it rotated left and climbed, her door gunner firing at the enemy shuttle hovering above them.

Casimir also saw the shuttle trying to draw the enemy shuttle away from the rooftop by forcing them to break away to avoid fire. "NO!" he yelled. "Get Deliza out of here!" he ordered Commander Erbe as he took aim at the third group of Ybarans descending from the shuttle above them.

Casimir felt a sudden burning sensation in his left side, followed by a wave of excruciating pain, but he ignored it, continuing to fire at the Ybarans rushing toward them. His only concern was for the well-being of his only surviving child.

"Two Eight!" Commander Erbe called over his helmet comms. "Jump out now! That's an order!"

"Two Eight, jumping!"

Casimir and Erbe continued firing as they moved toward the doorway. Two more Ybarans fell to their fire, as another Ghatazhak soldier succumbed to enemy fire.

Casimir paused at the doorway, refusing to enter and continuing to fire, until the blue-white flash of Jumper Two Eight told him that his daughter was safely away.

"Overload on shield generator fourteen," the defensive systems officer reported. "Switching to backups."

"The Crippin has partial power restored," Lieutenant Cahnis reported. "She's under way again."

"Her shields and weapons?" Commander Golan asked.

"She's only running her forward shield array at the moment, sir, but it's at seventy-four percent. She's got rail

guns and missile launchers, but no plasma cannons as of yet."

"Maneuverability?" Captain Navarro asked.

"As best I can tell, severely limited," the lieutenant replied. "She's not jumping anytime soon, and she's barely making two thousand right now."

"Shuttle Two Eight has just jumped in," the flight control officer reported.

"They have Casimir?" the captain inquired.

"No, sir," the flight control officer replied. "They only have Deliza and Mister Hiller. Copilot reports the pickup became too hot, and they were ordered to jump away by Commander Erbe."

"Missile launch!" Lieutenant Cahnis reported. "Twelve more inbound. Impact in one minute."

"Yoo is not going to give up easily," Commander Golan commented.

"Yes, especially with the Crippin managing to get back into action," the captain replied.

"Course change," the sensor officer reported. "The Astaire is turning to port and pitching down, Captain. I believe they are moving to protect the Crippin."

Captain Navarro thought for a moment. "They expect to win this engagement."

"How is that possible?" Commander Golan wondered. "Perhaps if both the Astaire and the Crippin were at full strength, they might stand a remote chance, but..."

"They do not have to defeat us to win," Captain Navarro explained. "We are not the prize they seek. He is still on the surface. They are trying to protect their two greatest assets, as they will need them to hold power should they win on the surface."

"Firing point-defenses," Lieutenant Rogal reported.

Captain Navarro turned to his communications officer. "Get me Commander Erbe."

"Four missiles down," Lieutenant Cahnis reported. "Crippin is now targeting us as well."

"From that distance?" the XO exclaimed.

"He's just trying to put on a good show," Captain Navarro said. "Prove that he's still in the fight."

"Commander Erbe for you, Captain," the communications officer announced.

"Erbe, Navarro. Status?"

"We've been overrun, Captain!" Commander Erbe reported over the comms. His transmission was full of static, and the sound of constant and heavy weapons fire could be heard in the background. *"I've lost more than seventy percent of my forces! We're outnumbered twenty to one at this point!"*

"I can send down more men," the captain replied, "more fighters..."

"Navarro!" Casimir called over the comms. *"Is Deliza on board?"*

Captain Navarro looked at his flight control officer, who nodded in the affirmative. "Yes, they just landed."

"Get her to safety!" Casimir ordered.

"My lord, let us send..."

"Negative!" Casimir interrupted. *"House Ta'Akar has fallen! Get my daughter to safety, Captain! Get her and the data cores to Earth!"*

"Casimir," the captain argued. "If we depart the cluster, who will protect the other members of the Alliance? Who will protect Darvano and Savoy? If the nobles..."

"Protect Darvano and Savoy, if you must," Casimir agreed, *"but ensure the safety of my daughter and those cores first! Promise me this, Suvan! I beg of you!"*

Captain Navarro steadied himself, taking a deep breath. "I promise." The captain closed his eyes for several moments, summoning all his strength as he listened to the sounds of the raging battle over the comms. "It was a privilege to serve you, my lord." Captain Navarro signaled his comm officer to end the connection.

Commander Golan looked at his captain. "Sir, we could still target the Ybarans from orbit..."

"And possibly kill thousands of innocent Takarans?" the captain asked. "And risk escalating this even further?" The captain shook his head. "No, we must think of the future of Takara."

"Casimir *is* the future of Takara," the commander replied.

"He was the future of Takara," Captain Navarro corrected. "Now that responsibility has fallen upon us. Us and his only heir." Captain Navarro pulled at his tunic to straighten it as he turned forward again. "Helm, set course for the Crippin and prepare to jump us to minimum safe attack range."

"Setting course for the Crippin and preparing to jump," the helm officer acknowledged. "Minimum safe attack range. Position relative to target?"

"Port side, aft of her midship line," the captain replied. "Lieutenant Rogal, prepare to fire all weapons at the Crippin as we come out of the jump. I want that ship destroyed in a single pass."

"Aye, sir."

"What about the Astaire?" Commander Golan asked.

"Two heavy cruisers gives them an advantage," the captain replied. "One puts the advantage with us. We shall depart the system *only* after we have secured that advantage, thus guaranteeing, at least for a time, that the

new leaders of Takara will be unable to reestablish their dominance outside of their own system.”

“And what of the Alliance?” Commander Golan wondered. “Were we not to come to their aid, as well?”

“I’m afraid that the Alliance forces in Sol will have to make do without us, for the foreseeable future.”

Casimir lay on his back, his vision blurred by overwhelming pain and despair. His side felt as if it were on fire. He could not feel his left leg, and he was quite sure that his right arm was gone, severed somewhere below his elbow.

The weapons fire had all but died, with only the muffled sounds of the firefight still raging outside his home.

His home. House Ta’Akar. Built over five hundred years ago, when his people’s ships had arrived from their four-hundred year journey from Sorenson in the Tau Ceti system. His home. The home of his father, and his father before him, and his father before. The home where he and his brother had been born and raised. The home he had fought for decades to regain. The home he had hoped to fill with the laughter of grandchildren.

He felt a hand on his right shoulder, and a gasping of air.

“My lord,” Commander Erbe barely managed to mumble. “A weapon, my lord,” he pleaded.

The sudden screeching sound of an energy weapon being discharged in the immediate vicinity made Casimir flinch. “Commander?” he mumbled, barely able to speak.

A voice. “Your commander is dead,” the man said. His voice was rough, his pronunciation poor and dirty. He was Ybaran.

Casimir felt someone pulling at his hair, lifting his head from the floor.

“Look at me, Casimir,” the Ybaran demanded in seething tones. “Look at me, Prince of Takara, brother of Caius, the enslaver of my people.”

“Why?” Casimir had to ask. “Why do you serve them?”

“The Ybarans serve no one,” the man said. “Least of all your arrogant aristocracy. We Ybarans fight this day for one reason, and one reason alone. To kill the brother of the one who enslaved us.”

Casimir felt the searing hot barrel of a recently discharged energy pistol burning the skin of his forehead.

“This is for all the atrocities committed upon my people by the Ta’Akar.”

Casimir did not hear the screech of the weapon discharge that ended his life.

Thank you for reading this story.
(*A review would be greatly appreciated!*)

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